50 MUST-PLAY GAMES OF THE GENERATION

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ISSUE 161

DEUS EX RETURNS
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HIGHLIGHTS GUITAR HERO LIVE ■ RAINBOW SIX SIEGE ■ ADR1FT ■ MORTAL KOMBAT X ■ BROKEN AGE ACT 2 ■ CITIES: SKYLINES ■ SHADOW OF THE BEAST ■ TITAN SOULS ■ NEVERWINTER ■ RIDE ■ LAST VOYAGE ■ UNREAL TOURNAMENT ■ I AM BREAD

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It sometimes feels as if the holy grail of this industry is to make a truly great *Star Wars* game. It probably has a lot to do with the fact that the generation that has built and innovated to make gaming one of the biggest entertainment forms in the world was also the first generation to be inspired by George Lucas' vision. Everyone since then has been chasing an unreachable objective of doing justice to that galaxy far, far away and a long time ago.

I wouldn't necessarily list any *Star Wars* games among my top ten favourites, but I might list them as some of the most influential or impactful in my life. *Star Wars: The Arcade Game* on Commodore 64 was probably the first game I ever played. *Star Wars Episode 1: Racer* was launched just as I was beginning my career as a games writer, occupying many lunch breaks and gaming sessions with friends. And *Knights Of The Old Republic* was the game that introduced me to BioWare, and set me down the path of following one of my favourite ever dev teams.

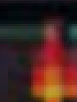
This issue we got to speak with DICE about rebooting *Star Wars Battlefront*, and while perfection may prove to be out of reach for yet another *Star Wars* title, this is as impressive and authentic an experience as we've ever seen a team deliver. How many more will it go on to influence in the coming decades?

Jon Gordon

Jonathan Gordon
EDITOR

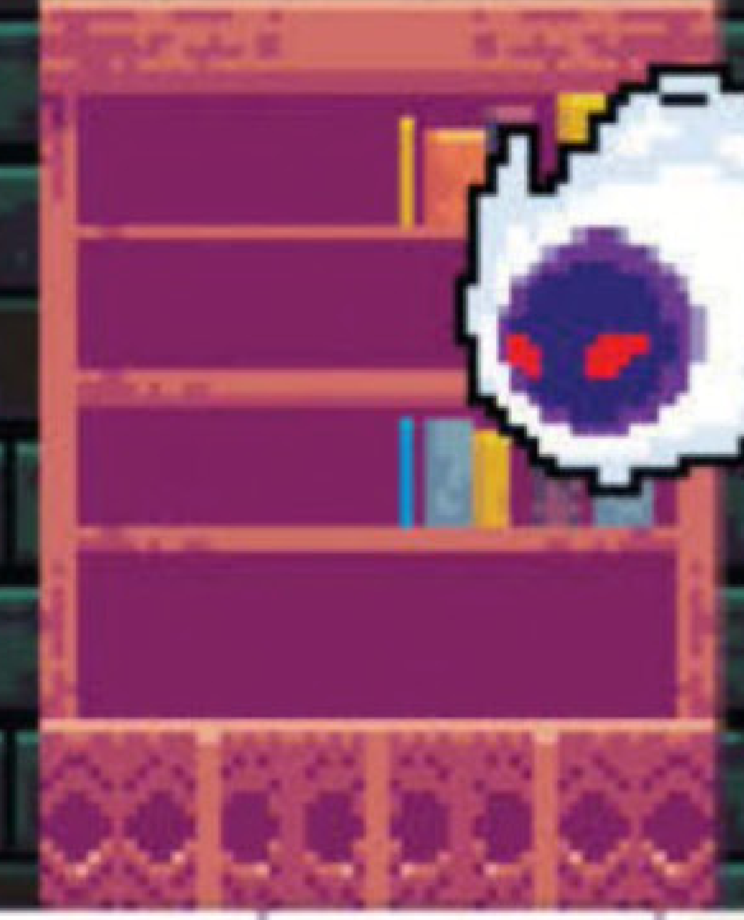



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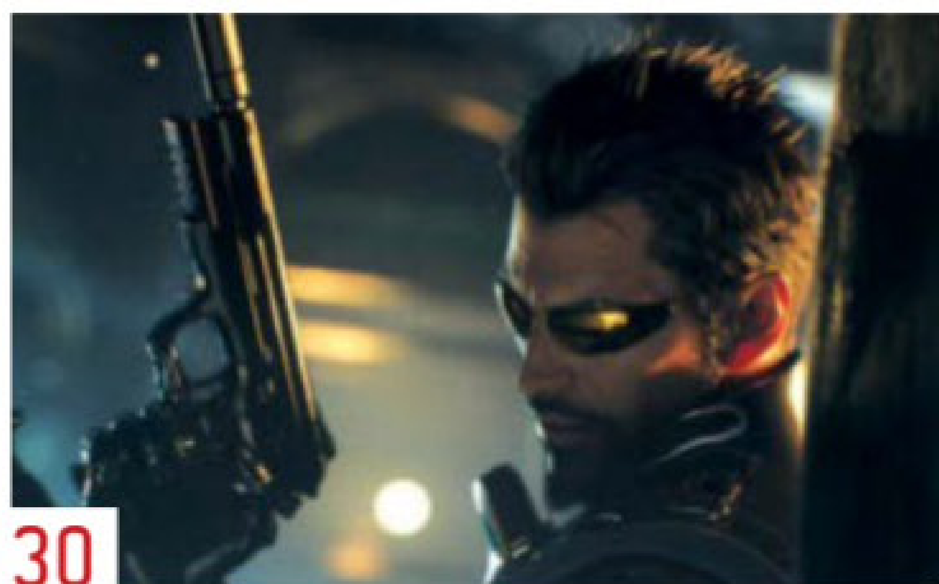



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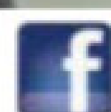
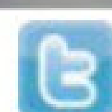

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Discuss

(XBOX ONE FIGHTS BACK)

Microsoft's Secret Gaming Arsenal

→Could the Xbox One blow the competition out of the water this summer with its lineup of exclusives for 2015 and 2016?

Look at the release schedule for the two leading console platforms this year and something very strange is emerging. The Xbox One might actually be beating the PS4 for titles in 2015 and beyond. As ridiculous as that may seem, given the PS4's success, the facts and titles speak for themselves. As we head into E3, Sony has *Uncharted 4* pushed back into 2016, the promise of some good titles on the horizon like *Hellblade* and *Street Fighter V* and a strong stable of indie releases to come. The Xbox One leads with *Halo 5: Guardians*, has



Rise Of The Tomb Raider as a timed exclusive, is releasing *Fable Legends* for free and is likely to have *Forza 6* too.

And that's before we even get into its 2016 lineup or the games it has in its pocket, likely to be given reveals in the coming weeks as the summer conventions take shape. The likes of *Quantum Break*, *Scalebound*, *Crackdown*, and *Gears Of War* are all in the works officially and there could be more besides if the rumour mill is to be believed. More on that shortly.

Whether or not you buy into the whole concept of opposing consoles or particularly care about which console has a stronger

DATA STREAM → DANIEL RADCLIFFE TO PLAY ROCKSTAR'S SAM HOUSER IN GTA FILM FROM THE BBC

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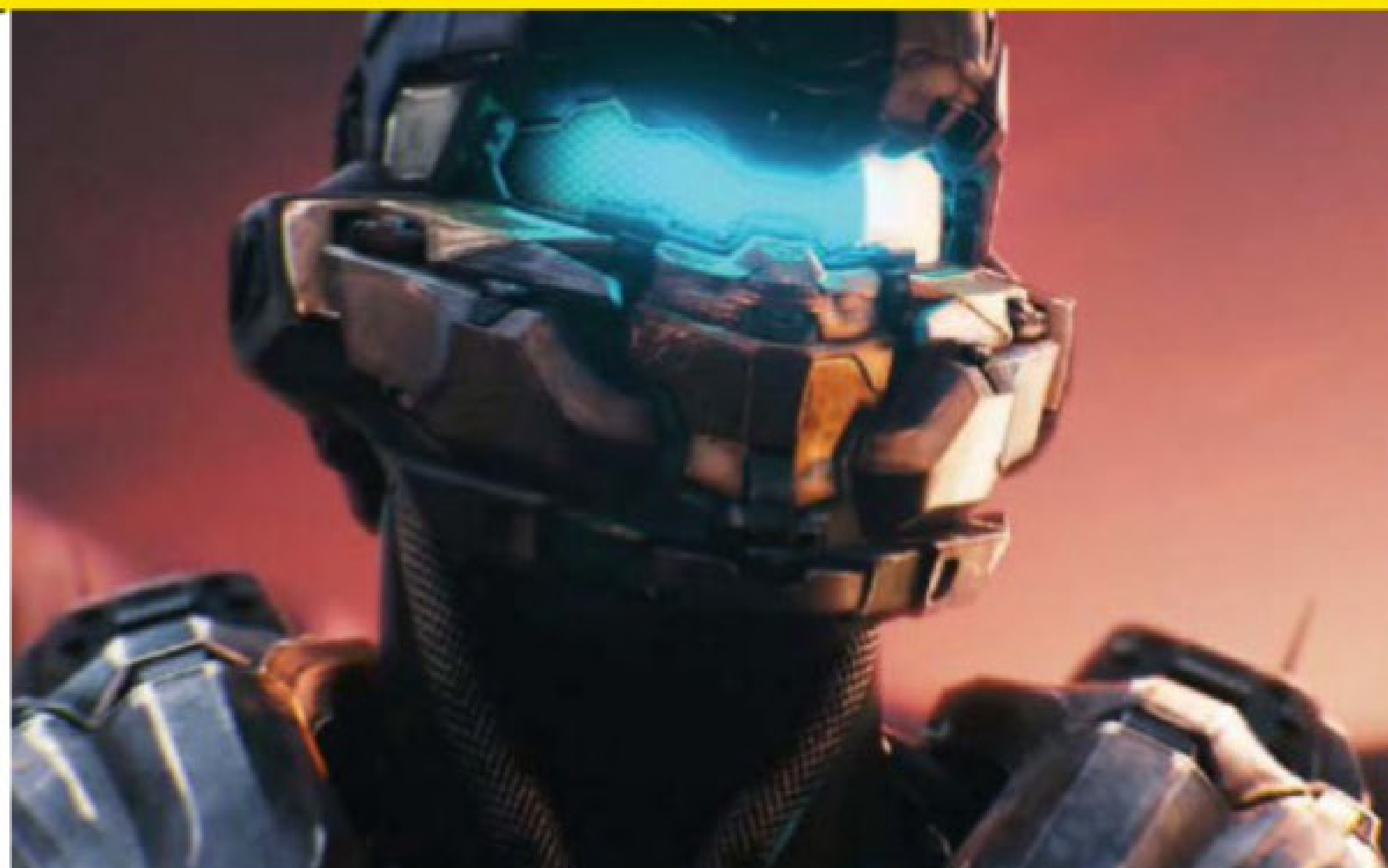
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stable of games is up to you, but how Microsoft has managed to turn this situation around is really quite incredible. From videogame pariah upon its reveal, the Xbox One has gradually been transformed into a pure gaming machine. A concerted effort to turn the image of the console around has been hinged upon securing fun indie titles, opening up its policies with regards to indie launch parity, dropping Kinect and cutting the hardware price point. Now the Xbox One looks competitive against the hugely more successful PS4 and its mammoth sales lead (9.1 million consoles ahead of the Xbox One according to the most recent VGChartz figures).

Above *Halo 5* remains the crown jewel of the Xbox lineup, even if players are feeling a little burnt by their *Master Chief Collection* online experience at the moment.

"We should have new exclusive IP at E3. I'm trying to make this E3 more about first-party than past E3s"

Phil Spencer, head of Xbox

But Microsoft is already getting ahead of the crowd with its E3 build-up too. As he departed Microsoft, Phil Harrison described Rare's upcoming 'secret project' as the thing he's most proud of having worked on to Gamesindustry.biz. A tantalising tease of what's to come from a studio many feared had seen its best days many moons ago. Meanwhile rumours of *Halo Wars* making a return refuse to disappear, with every RTS and strategy developer under the sun linked to the project, Remedy released its original pitch video for *Alan Wake 2* fuelling speculation of more to come from that IP and Black Tusk has yet to show anything of its *Gears Of War* series return.

Meanwhile, current head of Xbox, Phil Spencer was locking down E3 content in late April, promising a focus on first-party and exclusive titles, meaning a lot less in the way of DLC reveals this year and perhaps some even more games we're not even aware of yet making an appearance. We're certain at the very least that the Xbox One's greatly strengthened and appealing range of indie titles will get some significant stage time.

SO WHERE DOES that leave Sony? Still in the lead, for a start, and with its own big hitters still waiting in the background to make an appearance. Nathan Drake remains an ace in the hole, not least because it will be Naughty Dog's first title after *The Last Of Us*. Kratos is getting a little next-gen tease with a remastered release of *God Of War III*, *Street Fighter V* is locked down as a console exclusive and there's always the mysterious *Last Guardian* to keep looking forward to. *Gran Turismo* remains in development, but tends to take time, and many of Sony's other big titles have either made an appearance this generation already or haven't been seen in quite some time. The bottom line being that it probably needs to reveal some big releases for 2015 to keep the wolves at bay.

What this all means for us as gamers is that there's a real competition brewing again and as much as we're not huge fans of the term console war, when a good one gets building it keeps everyone on their toes and pushing out high quality exclusives. We may occasionally get something like *The Order: 1886* as teams push a little too hard in the wrong directions, but then we'll get a *Bloodborne* to balance the books. Right now the Xbox One is way behind, but with the kind of games it has on the horizon it could yet make up some of that ground and a strong Xbox One is good for all of us.

Below *Rise Of The Tomb Raider* may only be a timed exclusive for the Xbox One, but it could prove a decisive title for those still on the fence as to which console they want to pick up towards the end of the year.



Reader Reaction



- Halo 5: Guardians
- Scalebound
- Fable Legends
- Gears Of War
- Quantum Break
- Crackdown
- Forza Motorsport 6

Orb hunting for the win.
Jeff D

The one that isn't a shooty bang bang FPS.
Dean Veritiero

***Quantum Break* for me, loved *Alan Wake*. Next I would have gone for *Gears Of War* then possibly *Scalebound*.**
Steverulez

Something genuinely new and original, not just sequels and reboots…
Andrew Fisher

It looks like people want new IP from Microsoft.
Alex Tavener

***Scalebound*, although if you include timed exclusives then *Tomb Raider*.**
Mohammed Rahman

I like the look of *Quantum Break*, if it reviews well and there's a few other exclusives out by then I might have to invest in missing off the current gen of consoles…
Paul Linton

***Scalebound*, even though we haven't seen anything of it so far. Bring on E3**
Joël Hartmann

PAID SKYRIM MODS ON STEAM WORKSHOP PULLED AFTER COMMUNITY COMPLAINTS OVER PRICING

Games To Expect

→ More titles that should be grabbing headlines during convention season



MASS EFFECT 4

BIOWARE

■ EA'S E3 SHOWING last year was a little underwhelming to say the least, so we're expecting the publisher to come out swinging with its biggest titles. *Star Wars Battlefront* we already know about, but we've only seen behind-the-scenes work on the next *Mass Effect* so far. An allegedly leaked survey suggests an adventure on the outer reaches of the known galaxy will be the focus this time around, presumably before the events of *Mass Effect 3* at the very least.

> "The real challenge in working with an existing IP is making new things that have the same magic as the original things"
>
> Casey Hudson, BioWare



FALLOUT 4

BETHESDA SOFTWORKS

■ IT'S THE GAME we're all expecting Bethesda to announce at its E3 press conference and while we're sure other titles will take up some of its stage time, a return to the North American wastelands is what we're all hoping for. The fact that fans rise in raptures with every false rumour and hoax should have been evidence enough by now that *Fallout 4* is a game we all want to play on this generation of hardware. Hopefully the development teams have been listening and working.



HALO WARS

TBC

■ PHIL SPENCER LIKES to keep his finger on the pulse of the gaming world and when a bubbling of interest in a return from *Halo*'s long forgotten RTS outing rose up, he backed it almost instantly. Since then there have been whispers of development studios working on the game, many placing the likes of Firaxis and Creative Assembly at the top of a wishlist of potential studios, but what we're fairly certain of is that Microsoft is intrigued and it wants as much *Halo* out there as it can get.



DISHONORED II

ARKANE STUDIOS

■ WHILE WE WOULDN'T care to bet our lives on Bethesda revealing *Fallout 4* at E3 this year, a follow up to the hugely successful *Dishonored* seems far more likely, and a strong game to justify holding its own E3 conference. Rumours on this game making a return have been around for about a year after it was assumed leaked images showed a demo build being screened behind closed doors. Nothing emerged from that, but perhaps the Arkane team was just waiting for a bigger event to jump on.



BATMAN: ARKHAM KNIGHT TO INCLUDE PLAYABLE ROBIN, NIGHTWING, AND CATWOMAN IN CAMPAIGN



GOD OF WAR 4

SONY SANTA MONICA

■ WITH *GOD OF WAR III* getting a remaster on PS4 and Kratos appearing in *Shovel Knight* it would appear Sony is hoping to get the dual-blade-wielding Greek back in our minds. Late last year Santa Monica's creative director Cory Barlog confirmed a game was in the early stages of development and hinted that it might even be a reboot of the series rather than a prequel. Whatever direction the team chooses to go, we'd rather not try to imagine what it could do guts and gore-wise with the power of PS4.



NEED FOR SPEED

CRITERION

■ IT WAS A LITTLE eerie going into Christmas 2014 without a *Need For Speed* on shelves. We've had so many years of the racing series dominating the holiday sales that we just grew to expect it. A break, though, will hopefully have allowed EA's premier street experience team to hone something special for us to enjoy soon. Of course, it was suggested last year that we would see a new IP from the UK developer rather than a sequel, but either way we expect EA to burn rubber at E3 this year.



ASSASSIN'S CREED VICTORY

UBISOFT MONTREAL

■ WHILE UBISOFT MAY not have wanted to see its next *Creed* leak, everyone at least started looking forward to what *AC* could bring us in a Victorian London setting rather than dwelling on their experience in Paris. Typically, E3 is the time that Ubisoft brings its big-hitter out to play and while it may move a little more deliberately and carefully this year in how it promotes it, we're hopeful of what it can deliver.



STAR FOX WII U

NINTENDO EAD GROUP NO. 5

■ WE'VE KNOWN THIS was in the works since it was revealed at E3 last year and since it's been near complete silence on the project ever since, we're hoping it will be a big outing this year either at E3 or around the conventions on Nintendo Direct. Speaking directly to fans seems to be working out pretty well for Nintendo at the moment and with nine years since the last game, it will need to build interest in those fans once again. We're sure it won't be too difficult, though.



TITANFALL 2

RESPAWN ENTERTAINMENT

■ *TITANFALL* WAS THE first big exclusive of the generation and in some ways the first really exciting and seemingly groundbreaking release of the generation too, but we felt it was more of a foundation for better things. Now free of Xbox One exclusivity, we're expecting this mech vs meathead shooter will go multiformat and perhaps offer a far greater range of modes and maps this time around. Adding this to EA's announcements would certainly make it more interesting than events in LA last year.



MINECRAFT: STORY MODE

TELLTALE GAMES

■ IT'S THE BIGGEST game on the planet and now the world's leading episodic storytellers are going to take a swing at making an adventure experience in its universe. Anything that puts a blank canvas for creativity in the hands of these two teams should deliver something enjoyable. Expect to get a first look at what will come from this collaboration on one of the main stages, most likely Microsoft's.

RUMOURS ABOUND THAT GEARS OF WAR REMASTER IS COMING TO XBOX ONE IN 2015



(FINISH HIM!)

How Mortal Kombat X Plans To Live Forever

→ Unlike the vast majority of its kombatants, Mortal Kombat is immortal. 23 years after its first outing, the franchise is still going strong, and thanks to some online innovations implemented by NetherRealm Studios, the newest game plans to stay alive far longer than any of it's ill-fated kharacters…

On the eve of *Mortal Kombat X*'s launch, we caught up with game designer Derek Kirtzic to talk about how NetherRealm plans to keep the game's heart ticking over, long after fans have taken off the head…

NetherRealm has also included the Living Towers, something that intends to keep the game alive past it's shelf life; where did that idea come from?
Well, for us, the Living Towers are a great way for people that just want to play single-player content invested in our game – we have an Hourly Tower that has a single modifier that gets more and more intense the more you climb the tower, we have a Daily Tower that switches every 24 hours and will feature pure chaos with its modifiers and traditional challenges and permutations, and then there's the Premier Towers – these are more themed towards holidays or trying out new DLC. With every DLC release, you'll download a 'kompatability' pack that gives you all the character information in that pack, so the Premier Towers let you try characters you might not want to buy straight away. The Premier Towers also feature little nuggets of lore, so all the hardcore *MK* nuts have got something to give fanfare to, you know?



Above Some costumes, such as Farmer Jax, can only be unlocked via the game's mobile app – another way of extending the game's lifespan indefinitely.

It's an interesting try-before-you-buy policy with DLC that you don't see a lot of studios adopting.
Yeah, exactly – you see a lot of people saying 'Um, I dunno, Jason X – for example – looks cool but I don't know if I want to play him'. So you try a Tower for free and try all three of his variations and then you can decide, [there's] no pressure.

Is it difficult talking about DLC in the current industry's space, and getting it from the studio into the hands of the players?
I mean, I guess so, but I think with *Mortal Kombat X*, we really nailed it. We've got



UBISOFT HAS RELEASED A FREE CHILD OF LIGHT EBOOK AND CONFIRMED MORE FROM THE SERIES



Inset Rumours abound that NetherRealm is going to release 'klassic' Fatalities later on down the line, extending the lifespan yet further.

> "We plan on getting the characters out as fast as we can, that's something that's really important to us"
>
> Derek Kirtzic, NetherRealm

two extremely iconic guest characters first – Predator and Jason Vorhees – paired with two fan-service characters in Tremor and Tanya. Like, on our side of the fence, all we've heard from fans is 'Tremor, Tremor, Tremor!' you know? People have written petitions – and we love to listen to our fans, so we chose to bring him to life. I mean, he was in *Mortal Kombat Vita* and a bit in *Mortal Kombat Special Forces*, but with this DLC, we've made him a real character, [we've] really given him his own personality.

How long do you plan to support the game post-launch?

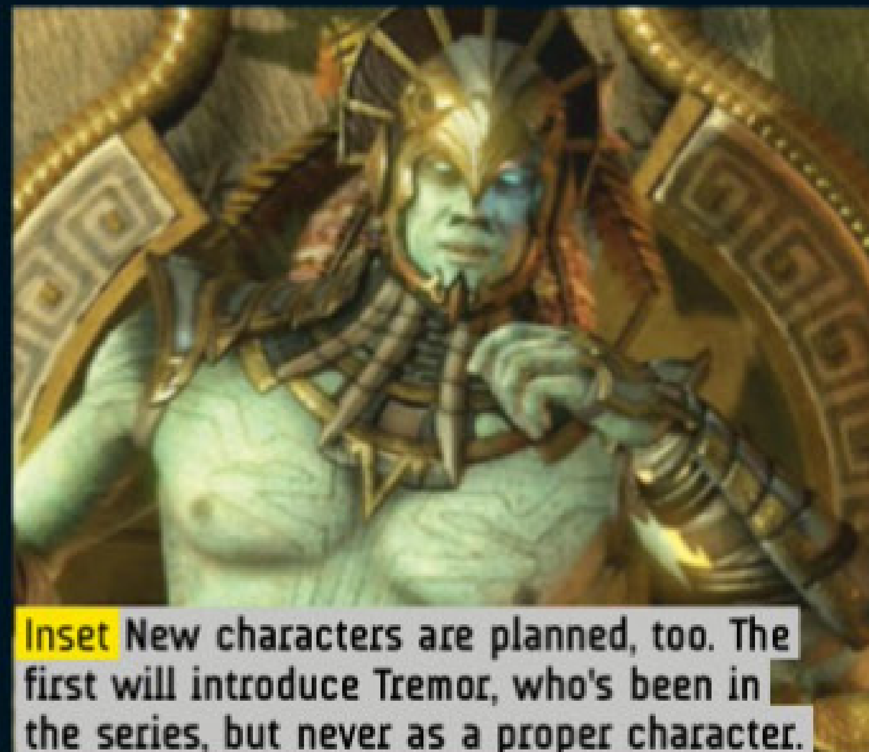
We plan on getting the characters out as fast as we can, that's something that's really important to us. None of the characters are on-disc right now, I can tell you that: I read messages on forums saying we're just trying to cash in on them, and all I can say to that is 'We are absolutely not'. Those characters are still in development, a majority of them will be out before EVO – [after all,] we want to see what people can do with them! – and we're at the studio crunching hard because we want to see these characters out there as much as the fans do.

How quickly can you adjust balancing issues in the game if you realise a character is over-powered somewhere?

Well, there was something we introduced into *Injustice* called the 'tweak [variables]', which is basically a series of knobs behind-the-scenes that allow us to adjust just damage, break frames, cancel frames [and so on]. We can mess with all that without having to put out a patch – behind the *Injustice* scenes, we were always looking at forums, watching combo videos… We didn't want anything to be broken; we could fix it on the fly.

So that must surely tie into the frame data you display in the Pause Menu, then, too?

Absolutely, and we like having that there because it's like a built-in strategy guide or tutorial for new players, while the veterans can look at it and go 'hmm, OK, I can do this, this, this and this' straight away. These values will change depending on what we did on the back-end, too, so you'll always know what your moves are doing technically as well as [visually]. 



Inset New characters are planned, too. The first will introduce Tremor, who's been in the series, but never as a proper character.

A MATTER OF FACTION

→ *Mortal Kombat X* has introduced the Faction War to the series – a multi-faceted campaign that operates across all platforms. It aims to give longevity to the game, and keep offline players interested in the greater product they're helping shape.

■ "What's great about the Faction War is that Towers, Daily Challenges and even Story Mode contributes towards this one big pool," explains Kirtzic, "So that's five councils playing one big game against each other over every platform: you won't get a different winner on Xbox compared to PC. So you're working together with everyone here, and hopefully that will give you a sense of solidarity to your chosen Faction, you'll want to do the best you can to get your rewards for your team that month."

That's an interesting idea in theory, but since launch, we've only seen one of the five clans (the Lin Kuei) get more and more popular as players flock to the winning team since – well, it's been winning since day one. Right now it makes very little sense to back a loser (like us, who went White Lotus). Hopefully this kind of balance will be addressed in a patch, though.



Below Even if you want to keep to the offline modes, there's still a tonne of content to work through – seeing all character's X-rays is fun enough.

→ ANCESTORS: THE HUMANKIND ODYSSEY ANNOUNCED AS CREED CREATOR PATRICE DESILETS' NEW GAME →

KONGETSU
FFXV'S LIMIT BREAK

What each territory's feedback says about the state of play



I was fortunate enough to speak with *FFXV* director Hajime Tabata shortly before the *Episode Duscae* demo dropped and while I've done enough interviews in my time to know to take the 'We will be listening closely to and acting on fan feedback' line with a pinch of salt, there was something in Tabata's emphatic delivery that told me this time would be different. So to see Square come out with a full Active Time Report stream about reactions to the demo and exactly how these would be addressed was somewhat validating and, more importantly, absolutely fascinating.



Feedback from Europe, North America and Japan showed three *completely* different outlooks in terms of positive and negative receptions to various aspects of the demo. Almost 80 per cent of American respondents claimed to only have stopped playing because they had done everything and felt satisfied with it, compared to just five per cent of Japanese players who thought that way. Tabata told me that the team had taken inspiration from Western open-world RPGs for some aspects of *XV*'s design and it's these that don't seem to sit right with Japanese fans based on the feedback Square shared – 20 per cent of Japanese players said they didn't understand what they were suppose to be doing, with a large portion of responses also claiming it was simply too large, too difficult and too long. Over here, where most of us are familiar with games like *Fallout 3* and *The Elder Scrolls*, these areas were of far less concern, with combat, controls and world density the main mechanics under scrutiny. Well, those and one other – one mechanic in particular who has been a talking point since she was first revealed.

I speak of course of Cindy, *XV*'s impractically-clad engineer whose overly sexualised look was the primary issue European gamers had with the demo. It's unsurprising that her design has gone down well in Japan – the country that recently gave us such treats as *Monster Monpiece* (where you power up Monster Girls by beating off your Vita to undress them) and *Senran Kagura* (in which busty ninja girls frequently lose their clothes) – but it's more important than ever for Japanese developers to realise that respectful and inclusive depictions of all genders and races is crucial to international success. The blatant objectification seen in the two niche games I mentioned can be explained as the product of vast cultural differences (I'm amazed either game came out over here) but that logic doesn't wash for a game which, on Tabata's admission, is targeting a global rather than domestic Japanese market. As it stands, Cindy's design is laughable. Embarrassing, even. But given her role, she's only an oily set of overalls and decent script away from being a great character, ready to help most of N*SYNC get their fancy car back on the road.

> One mechanic in particular has been a talking point since she was first revealed

The people have spoken, Square. Please look forward to the fallout if you don't heed their words.

Luke Albiges is Deputy Editor of **Play** magazine and is excited for a second tour of the Duscae region, as long as it doesn't push the main game back too far...



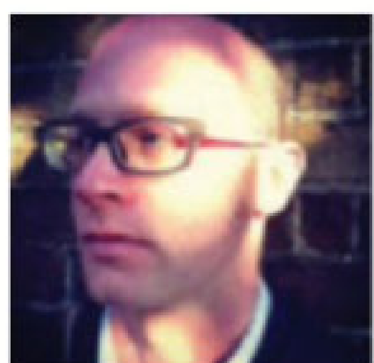
● Nintendo's simple rhythm-action series is one of the most enjoyable and traditional examples of the genre out there, so we're overjoyed to see a new 3DS game join the family. Featuring over 100 musical mini-games and single-cart multiplayer via Download Play, it stands to be the best in the series so far – it even brings back a selection of the most popular games from previous entries.



ROOM WITH A VIEW
With The Chinese Room's Dan Pinchbeck



Is E3 good for developers?



So it's E3 time again, when the great and good of the games industry converge on LA to watch British developers squint and burn in the sunlight they are normally deprived of. It's big on spectacle and noise, with all of the major upcoming titles in variously playable forms, big screen demos and presentations, lots of hungover devs and journalists stumbling around, and then lots of locked doors and warrens of meeting rooms looping around the edge where the real business is all happening.

It was my first E3 last year, showing an early build of *Everybody's Gone to the Rapture* off to press. I've been at gamescom in Cologne a couple of times now, so the madness of the temporary towns and pyrotechnics aren't new, but it's still pretty overwhelming. You get the sense that you could achieve much of the same impact by firing strobes into the eyes of everyone who walks through the door and blasting them with 180 decibels of white noise until they start whimpering and shaking, and then follow that up with men in suits tossing bundles of fifty dollar bills into a bonfire for three days… E3, like most other shows is ironically a pretty awful place to show games, particularly games like *Rapture*, but no-one really comes out of it that well. The whole thing has a slightly weird air of being a multimillion dollar my-stick-is-bigger-than-yours exercise, a macho muscle-flex for the industry.

> Push aside the spectacle of E3, the NDAs and the legalese, the problems with cynicism and noise, and you've still fundamentally got a meritocracy

It's bloody brilliant, though. The whole mad rush of it is pretty intoxicating, at least for a first time attendee. You get a sense of the sheer weight of the industry, as much as the power of the financial juggernaut rolling in a slightly out-of-control way down the tracks. It's impossible to move around without bumping into people you know, or people you've hero-worshipped for the last couple of decades, and it makes you feel part of something. For all the NDAs and Do Not Enters, behind it all are a bunch of people that love what they do and are, generally speaking, as excited that they get to make games for a living as they were the first day they realised it was an actual possibility.

The first time I was at a game event – a Develop conference years ago when I was still teaching – one of my students who wanted to be a writer very shakily and nervously approached Greg Zeschuk from Bioware, just to tell him that he was a fan, and instead the good Doctor gave him ten solid minutes of advice and encouragement. After years working in the arts, which can be repressed and competitive, I was pretty gobsmacked and fell in love with working in the industry pretty much there and then.

You can push aside the spectacle of E3, the NDAs and the legalese, the problems with cynicism and noise, and you've still fundamentally got a meritocracy, where good people making good stuff can get by, and you find that passion and the desire to chew the fat with like-minded, equally passionate people running through the core of the industry. I'm really proud to be part of that. E3 isn't about booths and ten foot fibreglass avatars or giant sums of cash, it's a critical mass of brilliant people, and that's the best possible reason for it to exist.



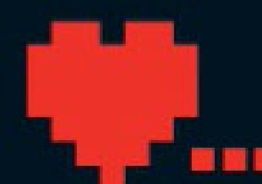
■ The heaving masses of E3 seem to get bigger each year, with more and more looking for smaller, special gaming experiences if they can find them.

Dan Pinchbeck is the creative director at The Chinese Room, currently working on Everybody's Gone To The Rapture. His views aren't necessarily representative of **games™**



"It's kind of a dream come true for me to work on this franchise now because I have such fond memories of playing it when I first got into this industry"

HANS LOWE, PRODUCTION MANAGER, NETHERREALM STUDIOS

WHY I ...

MORTAL KOMBAT

HANS LOWE, PRODUCTION MANAGER, NETHERREALM STUDIOS

“This is going to sound cheesy considering where I work, but Mortal Kombat *is probably my favourite game, y’know, ever. I’ve been in the games industry a long time; I started back in ’88 and way back in the days of the SNES, [working with Nintendo] on that early stuff. Midway [the publisher of* Mortal Kombat *at the time], sent us an arcade cabinet ‘for reference’ [laughs]. I remember working, and every now and then wandering over to the cabinet and going for a few rounds, and my boss would always walk over and tap me on the shoulder and go, ‘Come on’… but I would always sneak back and have a few more matches. So yeah, it is kind of a dream come true for me to work on this franchise now because I have such fond memories of playing it at a very young age when I first got into this industry.”*



"Black Ops III is a dark, gritty future where a new breed of black ops soldier emerges and the lines are blurred between our own humanity and the cutting-edge military robotics that define the future of combat"

PRESS RELEASE ACTIVISION

It looks like you'll be pitted against enemies both cybernetic and human – blurring that line between inconsequential cannon fodder and enemies that actually have emotional impacts (in theory).

Call Of Duty: Black Ops III

CONCEPT ■ In 2060, war is back to what it used to be – no more of this reliance on drones, no more of this tech-based Cold War mimicry: it's back to real people, on the ground...

Black to the future

The way we play FPS games has changed. No more hammering away with just an assault rifle and grenades; no, now it's about movement, escaping, jumping, running… It's about the fluid and skilful exploitation of your environment. With this trend of attaching a thruster to every feasible place (*Titanfall, Killzone, Advanced Warfare* et al), we've all become used to moving geometrically. Imagine a heat map of your favourite recent online shooter – the trajectory of your movements would likely form an impressionist graph, etched in blood. The thing is, since the saturation of these boost jumps, mathematical 90-degree turns and U-turns, and verticality being the new buzzword in FPS games, we've gotten bored. It's time for a change.

So, yes, *Black Ops III* gives you boosters on your armour, but not as you'd expect. Rather than a short sharp burst of directional thrust, you get to control something more in line with the old gravity-beating space games: you can activate your thruster as much or as little as you like during your jump, course-correcting at will, giving you the opportunity to float, glide, manoeuvre towards a hole blasted into a wall.

Think of *Destiny*'s Warlocks – when you activate your special space-magic powers at the height of your jump, you can hammer on the X or A button at will, allowing you to levitate towards your goal, or get above an enemy to get the drop on them. *Black Ops III* (like *Titanfall* before it) wants to revolutionise the way you see maps and stages – viewing them as multi-levelled vertical conveyor belts, rather than singular paths with irritating little obstacles getting in your way.

/// But movement is just one facet of *Call Of Duty* games. What *Call Of Duty* is *really* all about is shooting: guns, collision detection, aim-down-sights, velocity. So how do you make a *Call Of Duty* game more, well, *Call Of Duty*-ish? By adding more shooting, obviously. Now bear with us, because that doesn't instantly make sense. Treyarch's approach to constructing this sparkly new-fangled *Black Ops* has been very 'guns up'. That's the studio's way of saying 'on the stick' – it wants to take you out of the action as little as possible, it wants to prevent that immersion haemorrhaging that happens when control of your player is wrested away from you, only to have some 'epic' Michael Bay-esque explosion play out glibly on-screen.

So instead, *Black Ops III* will be 'guns up', which is more pertinent for the single-player-focused gamers than it is for those that buy *Call Of Duty* games to discard the campaign in favour of some PvP action. The campaign itself is something of a departure from what you'd expect of a *Black Ops* game – which have been set in the past and a cynical 'present'. This time, you take on the role of a soldier in 2060, 35 years after *Black Ops II*, in which world leaders have taken direct action against the threat of unmanned air drones that blanketed the world in air strikes three decades ago.

/// Thanks to technological breakthroughs, the united nations of Earth developed DEAD technology (how creative), an acronym that stands for Directed Energy Air Defenses; this basically means any air superiority is rendered useless – military strength reverts to the power of footsoldiers. Footsoldiers, then, became the focus of military research, eventually being enhanced with DNI (Direct Neural Interface) technology; allowing them to pair up with computer systems, be equipped with cybernetic limbs and co-ordinate with other units without missing a heartbeat.

So, you're put into the boots of one of these soldiers and you're sent to a CIA blacksite in Singapore where – shock horror! – you lose contact with HQ. You're out there in hostile territory on your own, and to make matters worse, some canny hacker out there has just instigated the largest leak of classified military intelligence in recorded history. It's worth noting at this point that the *Black Ops* series has always taken its cues from real life – the second game made news when ex-Panama dictator Manuel Noriega tried to sue Activision for use of his likeness in-game – and it looks like *Black Ops III* is no different; this time, the 'historical figure' Treyarch is delicately lampooning looks similar to Edward Snowden.

INFORMATION

Details

Format: PC, PS4, Xbox One
Origin: USA
Publisher: Activision
Developer: Treyarch
Release: 6 November 2015
Players: 1-16

Developer Profile

Operating since 1998, Treyarch first came into the public light with the licensed James Bond effort, *Quantum Of Solace*. After Activision trusted the studio with the *Call Of Duty* franchise, the studio quickly began making a name for itself as one of the industry's forefront developers in the FPS genre.

Developer History

Die By The Sword **1998 [PC]**
Spider-Man **2002 [Dreamcast, GameCube, PS2, Xbox]**
Call Of Duty 3 **2006 [PS2, PS3, Xbox, Xbox 360]**
Call Of Duty: Black Ops **2010 [PC, PS3, Wii, 360]**

High Point

Call Of Duty: Black Ops was a refreshing change of pace back in 2010 – the innovative online modes and gritty Eighties settings were a pleasant change from the deathmatch mad modern-day shooters that saturated the industry at the time.

Satirical political pastiche aside, the campaign shakes up the core *Call Of Duty* formula that Treyarch has been playing with for the last couple of instalments. Gone are the selection of limited abilities you can only activate during scripted setpieces, replaced with 'Cyber Cores' that can be customised by players and used during any time, during any level. Think of *Halo: Reach*'s 'Spartan Abilities' – you equip different buffs to see you through different areas and obstacles. One of the revealed Cores is 'immolation' – an X-Men inspired power that allows you to set your enemies alight with a simple wave of the hand. You can also equip 'remote hijack', a perk that lets you patch yourself into drones and vehicles at will, and turn hostile tech against its creators.

But the thing we're most excited about isn't this sort of ability (come on, we've seen it all before), but rather the fact the campaign is open to you *and* your friends to play simultaneously. That's right, for the first time in *forever*, you can run through the main *Call Of Duty* story experience with up to three friends, meaning the team has had to approach level design in a much more open way. No more corridor levels! Rejoice! It seems like the campaign has actually been built *around* co-op as well – it's not just tacked on. There are multiple routes that converge at one point, for example, and a whole new mechanic has been introduced that allows you to tag enemies for your allies to map out, even if they don't have a direct line of sight (Treyarch calls this T-mode, but it's basically the same system that you'd have seen in countless *Tom Clancy* games).

> "Black Ops III's Zombies will feature its own unique story and XP progression system"
> PRESS RELEASE ACTIVISION

/// The focus on teamwork extends beyond single-player, though. Weirdly enough, Treyarch has taken its cues from the booming MOBA genre for some subtle changes to its multiplayer facet. A little peculiar, we know, but there does seem to be some logic to the shift: the class system of previous *Call Of Duty* games has been done away with (those custom classes were starting to get broken anyway), and instead, you've got *actual* players to get to grips with – seemingly emulating what *Rainbow Six: Siege* has done with its 'named' heroes, *Black Ops III* lets you choose a 'specialist' before each match, each with a selection of powers that are unique to that character.

These powers activate on kill-streaks – think UAVs from any previous *Call Of Duty* game in the last eight years – and give you a tactical upper hand in the bout… if you know how to use them. There are four 'specialists' revealed so far: Ruin, Seraph, Outrider and Reaper.

Ruin, a male ops soldier, can deploy Gravity Spikes (his weapon) which allow him to manipulate physics to get huge superhero jumps and slam down with an area-of-effect shockwave. His power, Overdrive, gives him a crazy boost to movement speed; combined with the Spikes, he becomes a run-and-gun tank. Seraph, a female ops soldier, is armed with the Annihilator, the meatiest hand cannon we've had the pleasure of shooting in a game for years. She can one-shot enemies with this, and penetrate armour – meaning you can shoot through (and kill) two enemies in one fell swoop. Her power, Combat Focus, allows your score to get multiplied with every kill, meaning powers at the top of her kill-streak ladder will activate sooner.

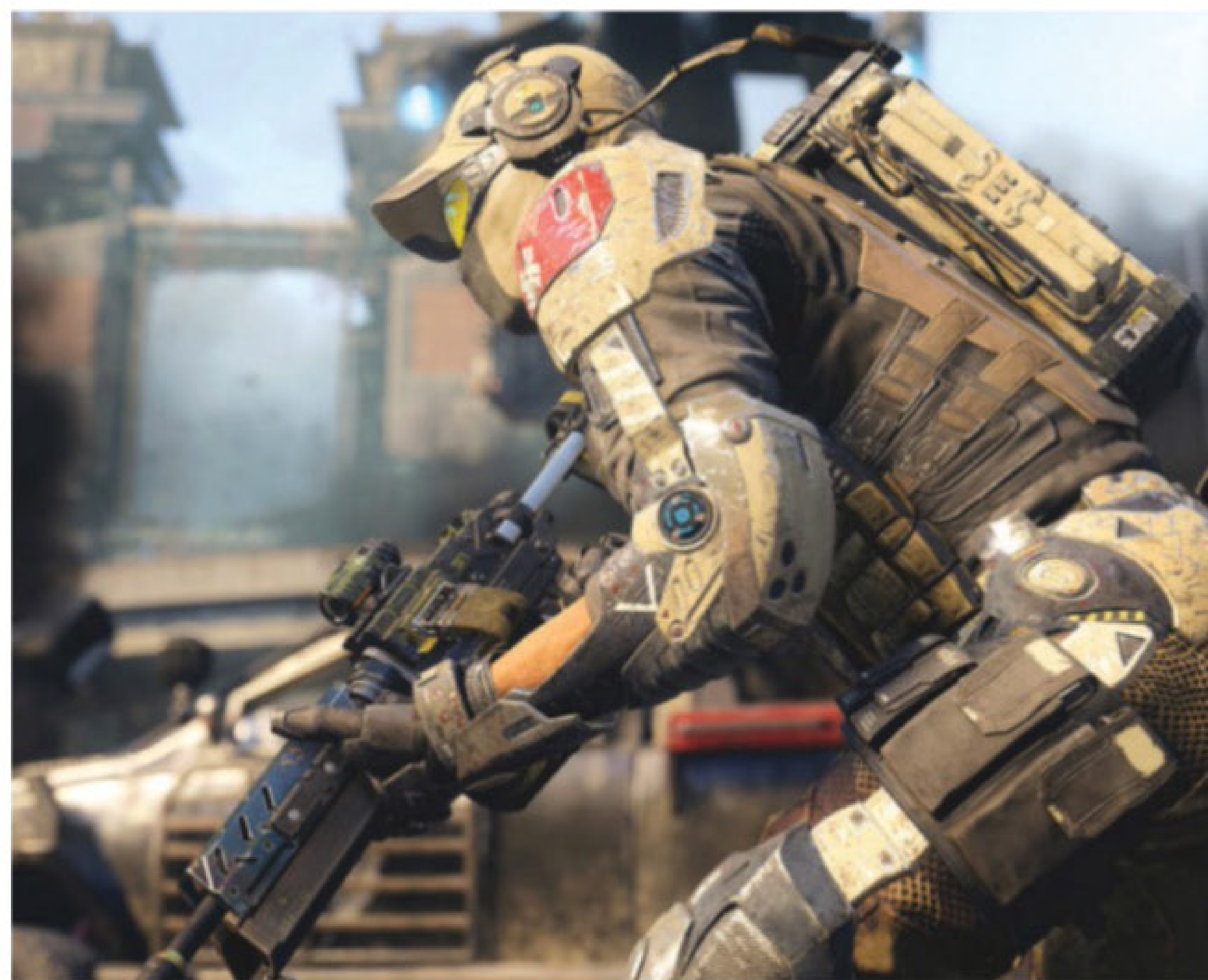
Then there's Outrider – the archer. She's armed with an incredibly satisfying compound bow, and while the start-up on her shooting animation takes longer than her peers, the impact of her explosive bolts is a damn sight wider than the other characters that have revealed so far. She's the Hawkeye of the team – tactical and ferocious, Hold her back until a group of enemies rounds a corner and *bang*, bag 'em and tag 'em (or something). Her power is Vision Pulse, a circular radar ping that'll tag all enemy players through walls, highlighting them for your team. The UAV of *Black Ops III*, and our favourite character right now. Finally, there's Reaper – a robot that looks like it was designed with a hat-tip towards Neill Blomkamp's Chappie. This is your up-close-and-personal unit; armed with a scythe, he can literally cut enemies down, but the drawback is that his retractable mini-gun arm hasn't got amazing range. Alas, he has the most technical ability of all: Glitch, a power that'll flash you back to wherever you were a couple of seconds ago. Perfect for rerolling that encounter gone awry.

It's clear to us that Treyarch has actually listened to the disenfranchised hardcore when it comes to this year's *Call Of Duty* offering. Yes, the studio might be ticking every box of the zeitgeist (fluid movement, MOBA-like setups, 'social' gaming) but these things are popular for a reason, right? With the budget and creative power behind the studio, it's not likely these ideas will be sloppily implemented. It might look similar to *Advanced Warface* and *Titanfall*, but we're trusting that Treyarch will make *Call Of Duty: Black Ops III* as successful as its canonical predecessor.



Above: What's scarier than a super-soldier armed to the teeth with guns? A super-soldier armed to the teeth with guns *that has a Mohican* (kind of).

Right: Being able to customise your guns on the fly is an interesting move for *Call Of Duty* – the desperate scramble for arms off the warzone floor might well be over. No more relying on that *awful* auto rifle your enemies seem to all love? Good.

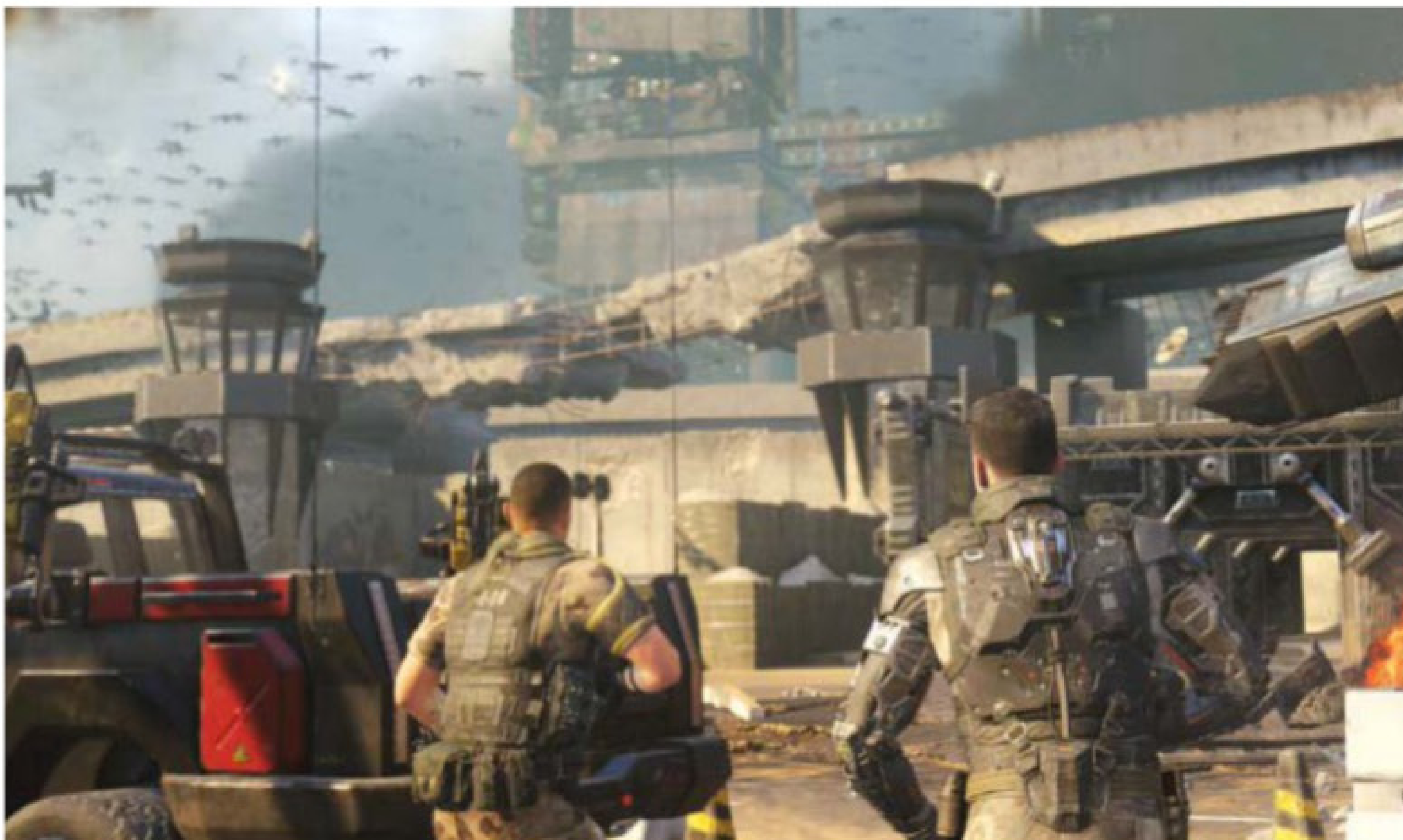


Above: That glowing circle in the soldier's arm could be one of the Cyber Cores you can upgrade and rework between levels. The 'immolate' perk is our favourite.

THREE IS THE MAGIC NUMBER

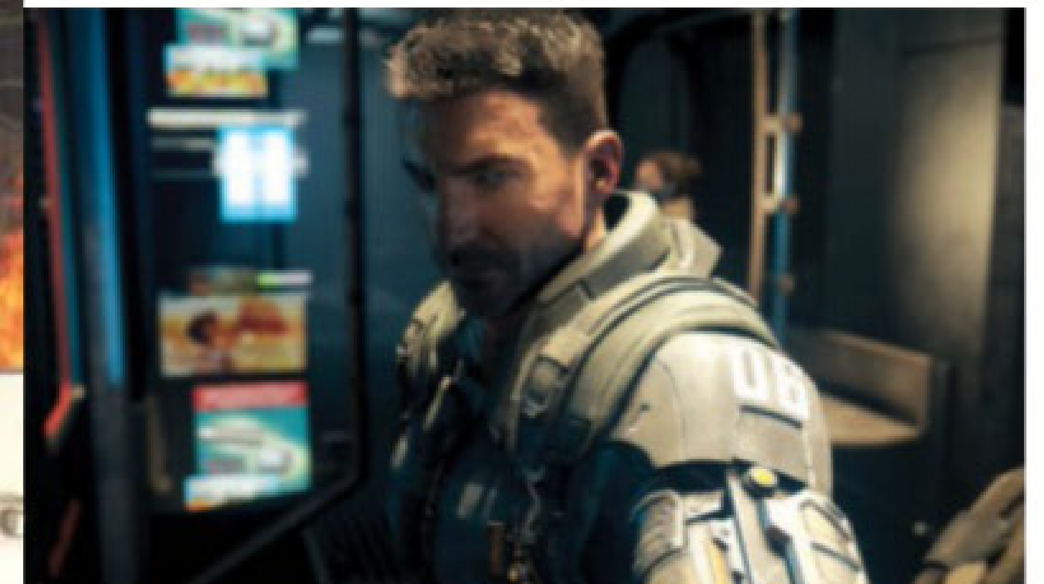
THE PREVIOUS TWO *Black Ops* games were rapturously successful, and in many ways were the cause of the year-on-year *Call Of Duty* iterations we see now. That bubble isn't about to burst any time soon, contrary to popular belief. Why? It's a numbers game. For example, *Black Ops* and *Black Ops II*, combined, still count a whopping 9 million players per month across all platforms – it seems devotees to the online portion of the *Black Ops* franchise can't get enough of the unique Sticks 'n' Stones and Gun Game modes offered. Add to that the jaw-dropping fact that *Call Of Duty* has so far brought in $10 billion in sales for Activision and you can see why the publisher keeps three studios on three-year cycles to put out these games…





Left: Despite the rise of DEAD technology (we wonder how that one got through any kind of narrative approval) drones are still a threat to be taken seriously…

Below: Another *Call Of Duty*, another macho guy with a good haircut and a taste for blood. At least this time we're getting a cast with some more complex female characters, though.





NOW IT'S PERSONAL

A STAPLE OF the *Call Of Duty* games has long been the option to personalise your avatar in multiplayer. Now, Treyarch is taking that one step further – allowing you to open the metaphorical bonnet of your guns and pick them apart, replacing this spring and that gauge, and customising your killing machine to reflect the cold hard killer that rests its finger on the trigger (that's you!). It's kind-of lacing the game with an additional RPG-lite system; you can see and test out how different each iteration of your gun is, and head back to the Gunsmith if you don't like it. We can definitely see this appealing to the *Gran Turismo* and *Forza* crossover crowd, but this might be an RPG element too far more many players.

FIRST-PERSON GUITAR HERO?

IT SEEMS WEIRD to us that *Guitar Hero* has taken on the first-person perspective for the spiritual reboot, but when you consider the perks of the POV, it begins to make sense. *Guitar Hero* has always been about the score attack, rather than the full-band fantasy its rival franchise entertains. So by having you stand (or sit) there and watch the reactions of your bandmates (who might get irritated if you squiff a riff) or the crowd (who may get more worked up the better your streak gets) lets you evaluate your performance subtly, without taking your eyes off that all-important note lane.

Above: Like in real life, looking to your band mates for approval will be necessary if you really want to look like a rock star – with your fake 'real' band Broken Tide.





Above: This crowd looks like they've lost interest in you a bit – maybe it's because you've forgotten how to play that song they all love and instead tried out a little experimental jazz...

INFORMATION

Details

Format: Xbox One, PS4
Origin: UK
Publisher: Activision
Developer: FreeStyle Games
Release: Q4 2015
Players: 1-4

Developer Profile

FreeStyle Games is a fairly small studio – consisting of roughly 100 staff, the British developer released its first game, *B-Boy*, on the PS2 in 2006. After working on the *Buzz!* franchise for two years, Activision purchased the studio and let it loose on the *DJ Hero* franchise, making good use of the developer's affinity for peripherals.

Developer History

B-Boy
2006 [PS2]
Buzz! Junior: Monster Rumble
2007 [PS2]
DJ Hero
2009 [Multi]

High Point

DJ Hero came at a point when peripherals were starting to wear out their welcome, but it was actually a fantastic example of how rhythm action could be prolonged in the wake of *Guitar Hero*'s meteoric rise (and subsequent fall).

Guitar Hero Live

CONCEPT The original rhythm-action party game is back, ready to once again go head-to-head with *Rock Band* in an all-out battle of the bands

For those about to rock... we salute you

"We always said that we'd come back when we had some great innovation," Freestyle Games boss Jamie Jackson tells us after we put down our guitar. "Everyone loved *Guitar Hero*, but we want something new." That's a fair point; there's a reason the bottom fell out of the rhythm action genre back in 2010 – the over-saturation of the industry was reaching a critical point, seeing at *least* two major triple-A music games released a year, with very little innovation between them. Our homes were filling up with guitars, drum kits and microphones while our hard drives were fit to burst with tracks.

FreeStyle has been promoted from its role on the splinter *DJ Hero* franchise now, though, and is intent on bringing fresh eyes to the market with a slew of new features that have, largely, been enabled by the new-gen consoles. The first (and most important) change comes in the form of digital distribution. The DLC schemes are arguably what killed the genre before, so new plans and methods of getting content to people are vital.

"We wanted to come up with something that allowed players to have a ton of fun online together but that also allowed them to get content in a different way," explains Jackson. "In 2010, we saw fewer connected consoles. We ended up having to do discs for people, which got us to this place where we were trying to hit the demand but had discs getting in the way all the time. But with Guitar Hero TV, we don't have to do that anymore – we've been able to come up with this new way of being able to give people content."

Guitar Hero TV is basically the iPlayer of gaming – you'll still get a pretty substantial track listing on-disc, but GHTV will allow you to view live 'shows' – want a modern rock hour? Tune in on Thursday evening, for example. Fan of metal? Hit up GHTV on a Saturday night. This substitute for traditional DLC may end up forming a really tight community online, although the 'Premium' option we spotted in the menus might hold that enthusiasm back a little...

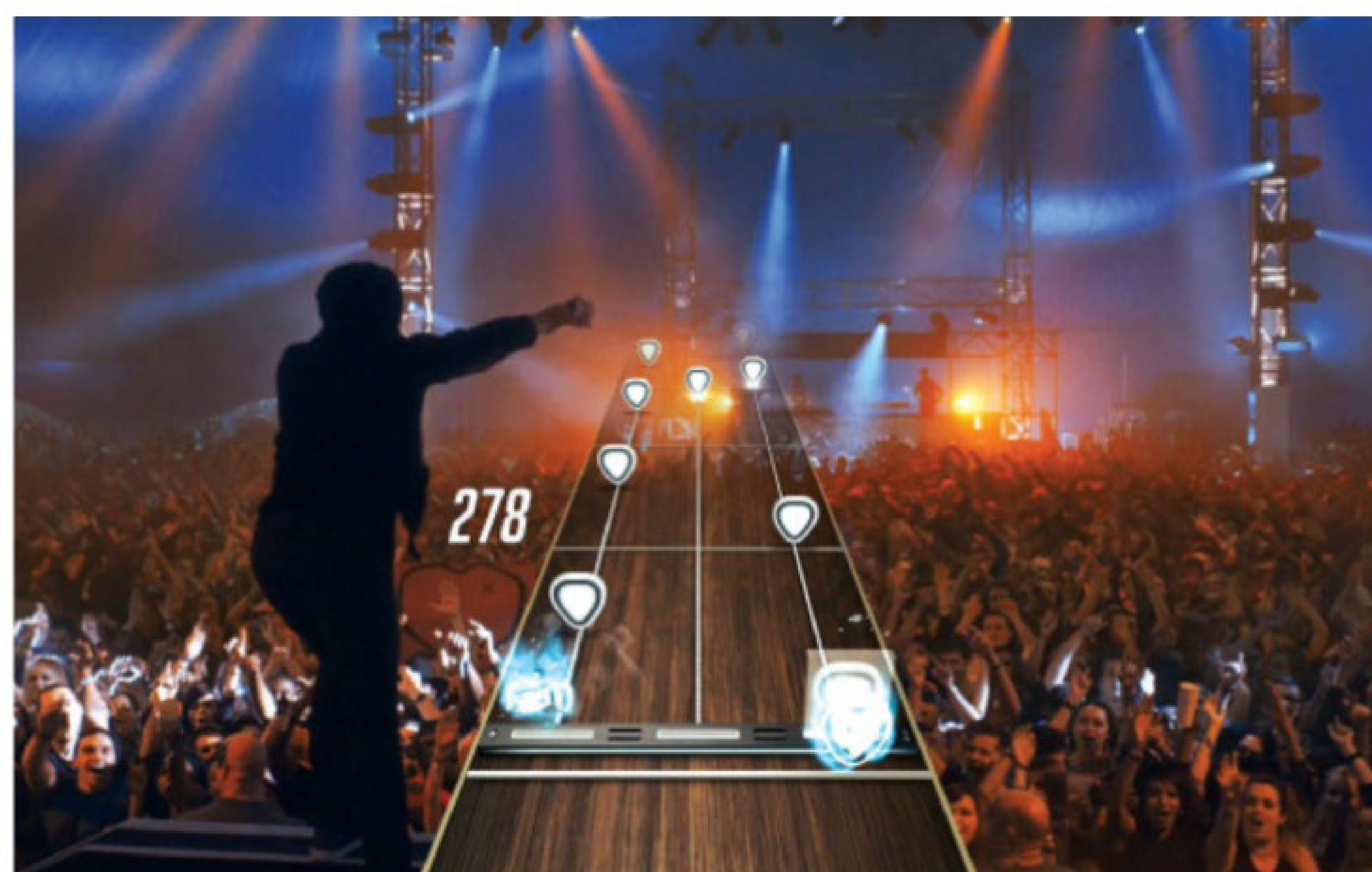
/// We were also slightly worried that *Guitar Hero* and *Rock Band*'s close releases might infringe on each other's markets, but Jackson explained to us exactly why that won't happen as we were playing. You want to sing, play bass or hit a couple snares on the drum kit? Go to *Rock Band*. *Guitar Hero* has gone back to being exactly what it says on the tin: a guitar game, focused on you, the guitarist.

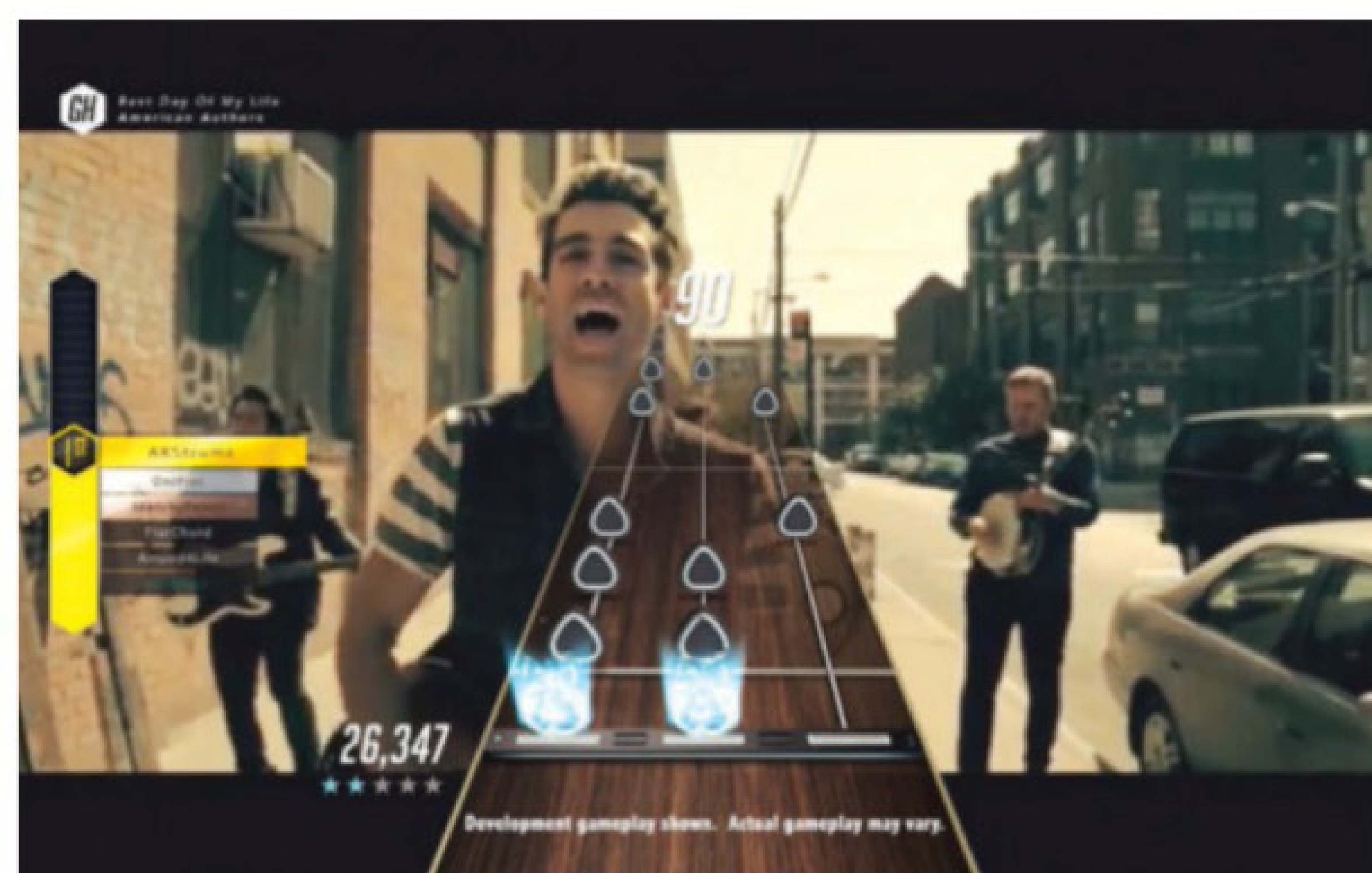
> "Everyone loved Guitar Hero, but we want something new"
> JAMIE JACKSON STUDIO BOSS, FREESTYLE GAMES

The new instruments (your old ones won't be compatible, sorry, but you'll see why) are shaped a little differently to what we're used to – the traditional line of five buttons is gone, replaced by two lines of three buttons (one row white, one black) that accurately mimics the feeling of hitting chords. The strum bar is identical, though, so you won't have to alter your play style too much. That might make those of you that invested *hundreds* of hours into the last-gen games balk a little, but take it from us, it really doesn't take that long to get used to. In fact, we managed to almost 100% Fall Out Boy's *My Songs Know What You Did In The Dark* on our second run. Partly because we're just that cool, but mostly because it's incredibly intuitive.

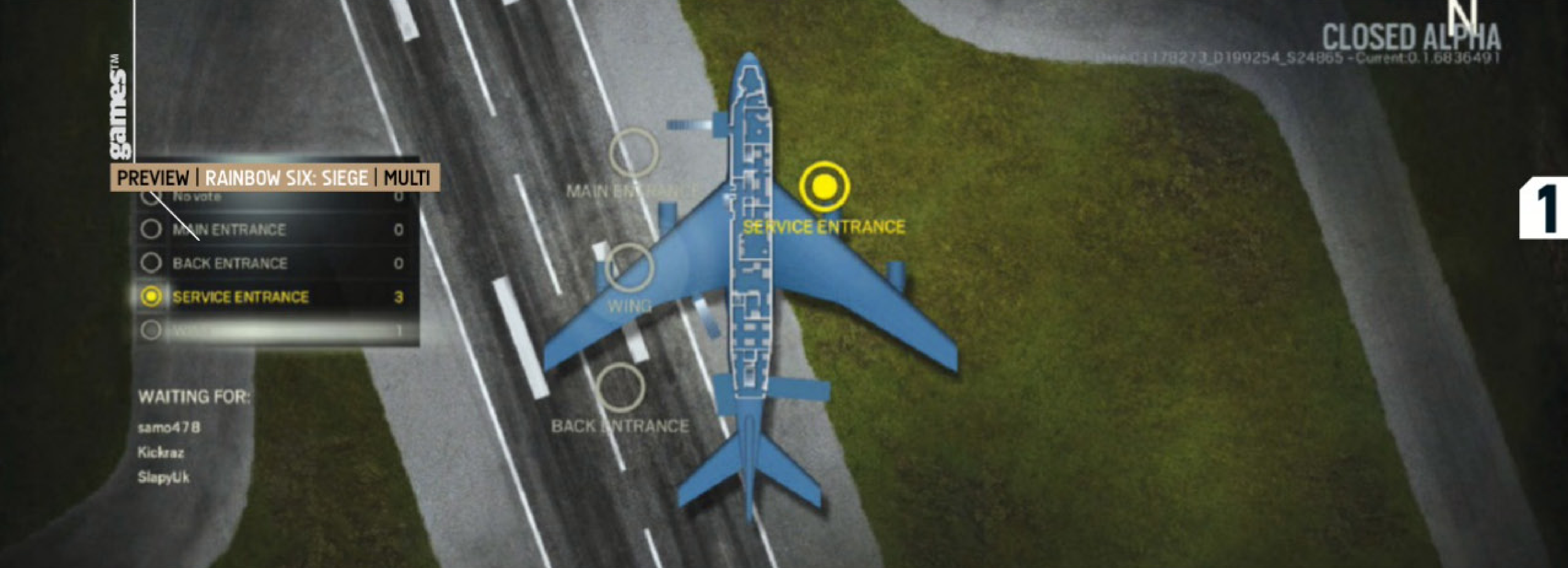
But why the change? Aside from wanting to shake up the paradigm a little, FreeStyle is doing what it did with *DJ Hero* – turning the brand into a full-on arcade-style score attack game. The first-person camera sees you looking out over dynamic crowds, very few distractions away from doodling around on your guitar, with the central note lane beautifully minimal and crisp. The game has been completely re-worked to provide the most competitively catered experience you can wish for – a far cry from the made-for-co-op party game that is *Rock Band*.

This is *Guitar Hero* streamlined and made fresh again, with a focus on rhythm-action skill to put you in the beaten-up boots of a rock god. We almost like to think of it as an alternate timeline on how this series might have evolved if the band gaming phenomenon hadn't taken hold. As it stands the old rivalry is back on and it's looking tasty.





Above: *Guitar Hero Live* will let you play along to the music videos of your favourite tracks – a pretty cool feature, and one we're surprised has taken so long to appear.



2

Rainbow Six: Siege

CONCEPT ■ By adding a sprinkling of tower defence and a heavy dollop of explosives, Ubisoft Montreal aim to create a tactical shooter for the modern age

Breach and clear

The special forces unit Raven Shield is about to infiltrate the president's plane. Our five-man paramilitary squad, code-named Rogue Spear, have only a couple of minutes to prepare for the assault. We secure the cargo-hold, barricading doorways, laying barbed-wire traps in the adjacent corridors, and setting up deployable cover along one wall of the room. A tiny camera on wheels squeezes beneath one of the barricades, rolling into the room. We destroy it, but it's too late. They know where we are.

There's a long, arduous minute of tense waiting. We hear footsteps above us, but we spy no movement. Then the entire wall behind us suddenly explodes inward, and it's all over in a few bloody seconds.

Raven Shield win this time around. But now it's our turn to play counter-terrorists, and with every round of *Rainbow Six: Siege*, you discover something new about your opponent. Read on to discover exactly what we learned during our time with the alpha.

INFORMATION

Details

Format: Multi
Origin: Canada
Publisher: Ubisoft
Developer: Ubisoft Montreal
Release: Q3 2015
Players: 10

Developer Profile

Best known for *Far Cry* and *Assassin's Creed*, Ubisoft Montreal has also been responsible for every *Rainbow Six* game since Red Storm Entertainment's final effort, *Rogue Spear*. 2005's *Rainbow Six 3: Raven Shield* was well received. Yet their best iteration of the series was the action-packed *Rainbow Six: Vegas*.

Developer History

Splinter Cell **2002 [Multi]**
Rainbow Six: Vegas **2006 [Multi]**
Assassin's Creed **2007 [Multi]**
Far Cry 3 **2013 [Multi]**

High Point

With *Far Cry 3*, Ubisoft Montreal took the ingenious ideas explored in the flawed *Far Cry 2*, and polished them to a brilliant sheen.

1 IT'S A TRULY TACTICAL SHOOTER

RAINBOW SIX: SIEGE is all about careful planning and speedy execution. Even in the pre-round lobby, you're making decisions that will influence your match. What class to play as, which room to defend as a terrorists and where to insert as a counter-terrorist. Maps are small but detailed, with multiple floors, tight spaces, lots of places to hide, and no perfect way to cover all angles. Relying on reflexes alone will more than likely get you killed, as often there simply isn't the room to employ traditional first-person shooter tactics. You need to consider your approach carefully, and try to get the drop on your opponent before they have time to respond in order to succeed in this game.



3



4

5

"We asked ourselves 'How could we capture the incredible tension and unique tactics of these confrontations?' We found the answer in the Siege gameplay and procedural destruction"

XAVIER MARQUIS UBISOFT

2 BUT IT'S MADE WITH MODERN SENSIBILITIES.

ALL THAT SAID, *Rainbow Six: Siege* thankfully doesn't force its tactical play on you with deliberately sluggish movement or clumsy gunplay. When the bullets start to fly, *Siege* is as slick and snappy as any modern first-person shooter. What's more, round times are strictly limited. Counter-terrorists have just three minutes to get in, grab the hostage, and get out safely again, so they can't sit around pondering the best plan of action while the terrorists twiddle their thumbs. Rather, *Siege* makes itself tactical through the range options it allows in your approach, then forces you to make decisions quickly as the situation demands.

3 A WALL IS JUST A DOOR WITHOUT A HINGE

SIEGE'S ENVIRONMENTS are highly destructible. Most walls can be destroyed using breaching charges, which not only looks cooler than an ice cube wearing sunglasses, but greatly expands your insertion options. Many floors can also be destroyed, so if the terrorists are holding up in the basement of a house, you can blow a hole in their ceiling and rain death from above. Destruction doesn't just come in big, flashy forms either. Barricades crumble gradually into pieces when shot, and certain walls can be perforated by gunfire. One of the CTs even comes equipped with a sledgehammer for the purpose of shattering barricades.

4 EVERY MOVE HAS A COUNTERMOVE

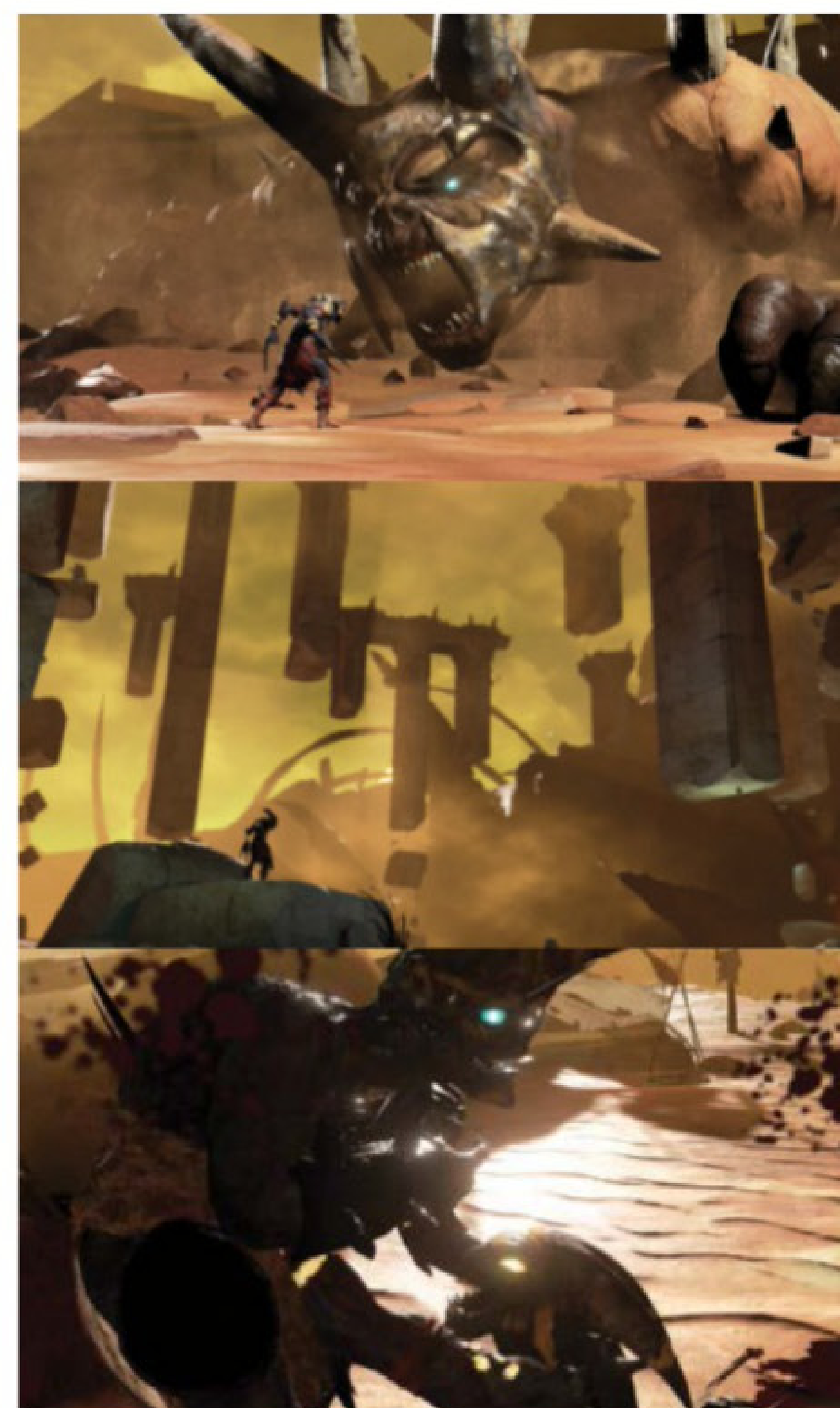
SHIELD ALWAYS allows the opportunity to thwart your opponent's battle plan. For example, the CTs have mobile cameras that can be used to locate the hostage prior to the assault. But these cameras can be shot by the terrorists, disabling them. And while the CTs come equipped with plentiful explosives, using them recklessly may result in accidentally killing the hostage, which means a default win for the terrorists. The terrorists can also dissuade the CTs from attempting certain entry points by dropping tangled barbed wire traps or planting C4 explosives. All of this happens dynamically as you adapt and manipulate your approach to your enemy's movements.

5 IT WORKS SURPRISINGLY WELL WITH RANDOM PLAYERS

TEAMWORK IS essential in *Siege*, and it's a game you'll want to try with a group of friends who know what they're doing. That said, it's by no means a farce with random matchmaking either. The game encourages co-operation in several ways. All players start from the same point, and the maps are designed in a way that you're rarely far from your squad. Even when one or two players run off, this can prove advantageous, as it means you can attack from multiple angles. Even a lone wolf isn't necessarily doomed. We've seen several matches where the last man standing has pulled victory from the jaws of defeat.



Left: You'd be this angry if you were turned into a raging beast, too – but Aarbron is channelling that rage into something constructive: *revenge*. Below: You're not just going to have to contend with swarming dregs and cannon fodder – there's going to be some *real* challenges afoot in Shadow Of The Beast 2016.



INFORMATION

Details

Format: PS4
Origin: UK
Publisher: Sony Computer Entertainment Europe
Developer: Heavy Spectrum Entertainment Labs
Release: 2016
Players: 1

Developer Profile

Operating since 2011, Heavy Spectrum Entertainment Labs is comprised from a team of industry veterans that have, by their own admission, worked on various multi-million selling products. Credits to the team's name range from *Need For Speed* to *Star Fox*, *Battlefield* to *SimCity*, *Dungeon Keeper* to *Formula 1*. The only games released from the studio so far have been smaller-scale mobile affairs – *Puzziball* and *Bullion Blitz*. Hopefully *Shadow Of The Beast* can lift them back up to the realms of triple-A.

Shadow Of The Beast

CONCEPT The world of Karamoon is endangered once more, and it's down to legendary warrior Aarbron to wreak vengeance on those that transformed him from man… to beast

A legend is Aarbron

"I played *Shadow Of The Beast* at an impressionable age – my friend had this Amiga he wanted to show me and he sat me down, overnight, and we played [the whole game],' explains Matt Birch, CEO and founder of Heavy Spectrum. "We began to dissect it, asking questions like 'why's this here' and 'why's that there?' and I was filling in blanks, not just following mechanics. It left a huge impression on me for that. It was more than just a game, it was an experience."

We've all been there, right? We've seen something unusual in the background of a *Sonic* game, a marking in a cave or dungeon in the *Zelda* series, or an odd little prop out of bounds in *God Of War* and we've thought 'hey, what's the story behind that?' Matt Birch definitely has, but rather than just have that creative curiosity linger in the back of his mind, he and his studio obtained the license to *Shadow Of The Beast*, and used that childish sense of wonder to create within an already established universe.

"I look at games like *Skyrim*, and you've got entries in there, in *in-game* books, that explain the backstory to your friend's dog or something and I love that – it's great when you're into it – but I was inspired by *games*… other art forms have learnt how to do the books and the movies, but the original *Shadow Of The Beast* had all this lore that you could place yourself."

It's an interesting – and fairly classical – take on how players should interact with a game, but it's something Birch really feels passionately about: when we first saw him unveil the latest screenshots (shown on this page) at a recent Sony event, he actually became quite emotional.

"We've written thousands of words of lore and backstory, so now *I* know why this statue is there, or why that thing's in that place. I don't want to expose that to the player, though, I want them to have their own little note sheet next to the game and they can mark down why they think something is there, with their own personalised opinion of what *Shadow Of The Beast is*."

So what is it? It's a safe take on what the original Amiga game was: a 2D adventure game with dual focus – exploration and combat. Heavy Spectrum wants to make the combat more fun than it was in the original, and to that end the studio floods the screen with bloodthirsty enemies, and has implemented a parry mechanic that'll help you crowd control a little better in the later levels in the game.

Otherwise, the game has kept the originals dark fantasy art style – derelict and sandy ruins cut up with imposing monolithic shapes. It's shaping up well, but it's still a long way from release yet.

> "[The original Shadow Of The Beast] left a huge impression on. It was more than just a game, it was an experience"
> MATT BIRCH CEO/FOUNDER, HEAVY SPECTRUM ENTERTAINMENT STUDIOS

1 SPOILER! The trailer starts with Jensen floating in the Arctic, where you chose to explode an Illuminati facility or reap it for information – it looks like Eidos chose the first, so Jensen made a bold move in the name of the augmented; a declaration of war, effectively.

INFORMATION

Details

Format: PS4, Xbox One, PC
Origin: Canada
Publisher: Square Enix
Developer: Eidos Montreal
Release: TBA
Players: 1

Developer Profile

Eidos Montreal debuted with *Deus Ex: Human Revolution* in 2011, and has proven to the world that it's are capable of restoring dormant IP to its former splendour. *Thief* may not have gone down quite so well, but the work the studio did on *Tomb Raider* (2012)'s online component shows it's more likely to succeed than not.

Franchise History

Deus Ex: Human Revolution
2011 [PS3, Wii U, Xbox 360, Mac, PC]
Tomb Raider (Multiplayer)
2013 [PS3, Xbox 360, PC]
Deus Ex: The Fall
2013 / [Android, iOS]

High Point

While outsourcing boss battles may have been a terrible call, the majority of *Deus Ex: Human Revolution* combined intense action and inventive stealth gameplay, proving a young Eidos Montreal's worth amongst the big industry veterans.

Deus Ex: Mankind Divided

CONCEPT ■ Adam Jensen is back, and this time he's got to deal with a full-scale war between the augmented side of humanity and the militant purebloods that oppose them…

We never asked for this

The Illuminati isn't a good thing, we think that through various forms of fiction, we've established that (if *The Da Vinci Code* isn't enough to convince you, just look at *The Simpsons' Stonecutters…*). Put the mysterious group of global elitists into a more speculative fictional setting, though, and things start to get messy – the end of the last *Deus Ex* game saw the Illuminati trigger an event that sprung all augmented humans (which there were a *lot* of) into fight-or-flight mode. Think of the typical *X-Men* storylines – small persecuted groups of people with better-than-thou powers – but with a catch: most people *chose* to be cybernetically enhanced.

This transhumanist narrative has been richly woven into the past two *Deus Ex* games, along with constant allusions to the Illuminati – now that we're at what looks like a climax within the series, though, we're expecting things to get kind-of apocalyptic: don't expect any happy endings here, either the humans or the augmented are going to die… and Adam Jensen is stuck in the middle.

4 *DEUS EX* balances gameplay between lethal and non-lethal approaches, and the trailer slyly shows us both, revealing new augmentations. It's loaded with particularly biblical imagery – Jensen is sporting neon angel wings… is he returning from the dead?

6 NEXT, A square in Prague blows up. Jensen is too late at the scene, and the yellow-hooded Hawke guy slinks off into the shadows. Was Jensen trying to stop the explosion, or was he part of it? It seems he's framed – perhaps he's a rogue agent, caught between sides?





2 NEXT, A hooded figure appears, revealed as Ivan Hawke, cut with alarming news reports seemingly lifted directly out of *The Hunger Games*. It's unclear who he is, but it's likely he's an ally – a begrudging underling of a massive, hulking cyborg that's introduced later.





3 WE SEE Jensen go to work on armoured lackeys – and he takes them down *fast*. A brief action sequence details his abilities; the stealth focus returns, and he's gained an impressive new jump, too. He's also developed a concussion blast, handy for crowd control.





5 NEXT, WE get a proper look at the 'boss', a stereotypical Russian baddie, more machine than man, wielding a crimson hand. He's set to be an enemy, yet fights for the augmentees, not the suppressive military – perhaps you will choose which side of the fence to straddle?





7 AT THE end, the terrorist boss makes Hawke kiss his hand, as Jensen offers his to a fallen, charred woman. This too looks religiously inspired (reminiscent of *The Creation Of Adam*) and suggests Jensen's role as the herald or messiah of a new transhuman race.

> "The Three One Zero team epitomises the tremendous passion and creativity of independent game development"
> IAN HOWE 505 GAMES



It's an affecting sight, but will our astronaut ever find his way home?

Adr1ft

CONCEPT Stuck in space with no memory, this is a tale of discovery and exploration

Floating in the most peculiar way

Next to being buried alive, we can't imagine a worse way to go than in slow, desperate isolation as you're left on a derelict space station as the only survivor after a disaster. Yet here our protagonist stands, with no memory of the events that caused such destruction, and a damaged space suit to keep him company.

A first-person viewpoint is the order of the day, but *Adr1ft* is no shooter. This is more of an exploratory game, as you'll have to piece together the mystery and try to stay alive. It's built with VR tech in mind, but it's coming to multiple platforms. It's hard not to imagine how impressive it could look in virtual reality, let alone how anxiety-inducing the drawing of breath might feel with headphones on.

Despite the bleakness of space, this has a colourful-looking, gorgeous aesthetic. Contrasting the pure-white design of the space station, there's all manner of greenery floating around that creates an unease, thanks to the zero-gravity you'll experience. A sense of urgency is conveyed through audio design, as your amnesiac astronaut slowly runs out of breath.



It's said to be a four-hour experience, and with these visuals, who wouldn't want to be lost in space?

INFORMATION

Details

Format:
PC, PS4, PS3, PS Vita, Wii U, Xbox One, Xbox 360
Origin:
USA
Publisher:
505 Games
Developer:
Three One Zero
Release:
2015
Players:
1

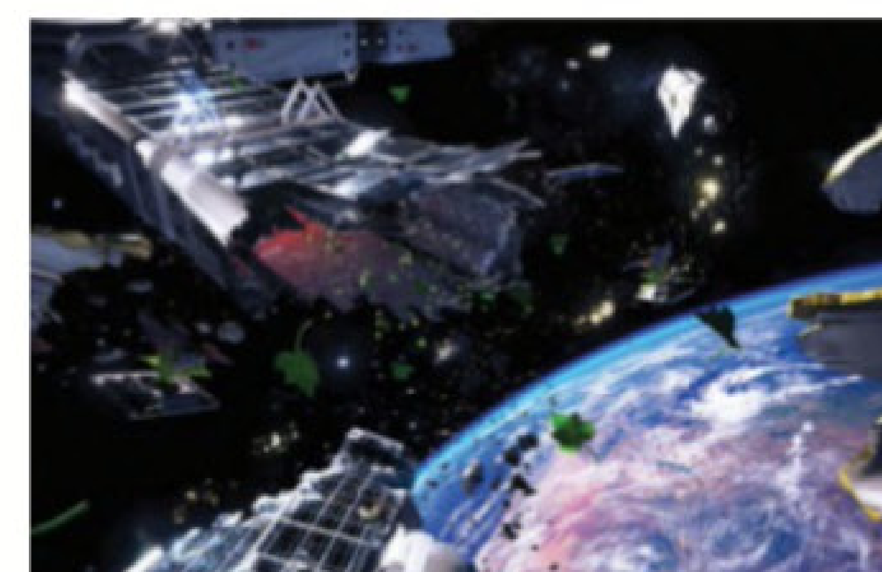
Developer Profile

Ex-creative director for Microsoft, Adam Orth became an internet meme thanks to his antagonistic "deal with it" statement regarding the always-on nature of the Xbox One. Vilified, he left the company and has turned to development with his studio Three Zero One, and *Adr1ft* is its first game.

The story is fleshed out thanks to audio logs found on the space station that break the silence, and while that's nothing new, we don't yet know who the protagonist is – so they could be his logs, or those of someone else entirely. Music is provided in part by Weezer, which may be another reason to be interested in *Adr1ft*. Elsewhere, finding a log that includes a Beethoven sonata and having it play out as you float through space is spellbinding.

It's exciting to see a game that appears so different, yet looks familiar. We're so used to shooting things in first person, but it's high time for an experience that marries the world-building skills of something like *BioShock Infinite*, and the sedate play-style of *Journey*. 505 Games has taken risks publishing interesting, but non-traditional games, in the past, to reasonable success. *Brothers: A Tales Of Two Sons* was a deeply affecting story, but this looks to be on another level, swapping the emotional engagement for a nervous tension equating to waking up and finding your town deserted.

Rudimentary puzzle solving risks breaking the immersion, which is a worry, but with no release date set in stone, we don't know how it'll turn out. Why is there so much vegetation on this space station? What has happened? We don't know, but for now, it certainly all appears very promising.

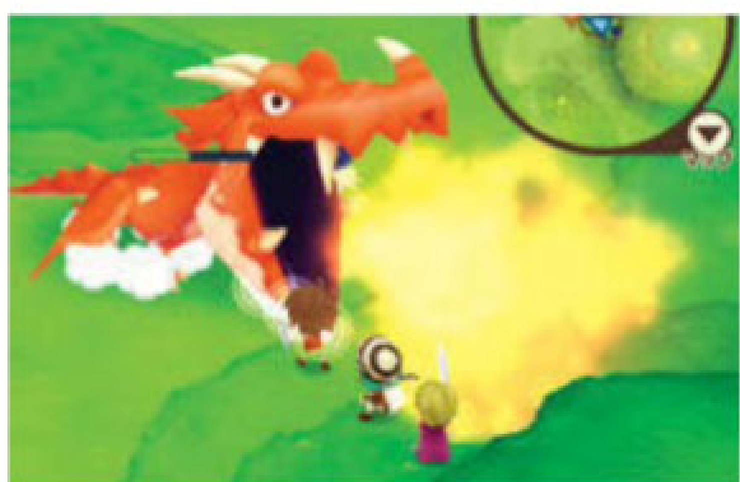


SHOWCASE

MORE TITLES TO WATCH FOR ON THE GAMING HORIZON

FANTASY LIFE 2: TWO MOONS AND THE VILLAGE OF GOD

Format: iOS, Android
Publisher: Level-5
Developer: In-house
ETA: TBC (Japan: 2015/US: TBC)



WOULD YOU like the good news or the bad news? Well, the good news is that Level-5 is actually developing a sequel to *Fantasy Life*. The bad news is that it's now a mobile game. The worse news is that it only has a Japanese release date as of writing. We hope to see this in international waters, especially as the sequel looks to expand on the original by implementing village building and follower collecting systems. Sounds fun. Don't let us down, Level-5.

SHIN MEGAMI TENSEI X FIRE EMBLEM

Format: Wii U
Publisher: Nintendo
Developer: Atlus, Intelligent Systems
ETA: 2016 (Japan: 2015/US: 2016)



HONESTLY, WE had kind of assumed that this had died and gone to crossover heaven. *Shin Megami Tensei X Fire Emblem* was announced two years ago, and we've heard barely a whisper. And then Nintendo goes and drops an A-bomb (the 'A' is for 'Awesome') on us and we're struggling to pick our jaws up off the floor. We never thought such thematically and systemically disparate games could work in tandem. Clearly, we were wrong.

BINDING OF ISAAC: AFTERBIRTH

Format: Wii U, 3Ds, Xbox One, PC
Publisher: Headup Games
Developer: Edmund McMillen
ETA: Q2 2015



A SLEW of updates are heading to indie darling *Binding Of Isaac*. Not only is the wickedly challenging dungeon crawler heading towards the new 3DS, Wii U and Xbox One, but the expansion is adding so much new content that it might as well be classed as a fully fledged sequel. With 100 new items, 10 challenges, new playable characters on the way – not to mention new enemies – you can expect the gameplay to be extended by an estimated 200 hours.

SHALLOW SPACE: INSURGENCY

Format: PC
Publisher: Shallow Space
Developer: In-house
ETA: Q3 2015



AFTER ROCKETING through the Steam Greenlight program, this space-bound real-time strategy game is fully on track to hit early access before the end of the year, and we can't wait to get our hands on it. This is one for fans of *Homeworld And Nexus: The Jupiter Incident*, as you take command of fleets of fully customisable spaceships, develop their weapons and look to survive the dangers of large-scale space warfare.

MOTOGP 15

Format: PS4, PS3, Xbox One, Xbox 360, PC
Publisher: Milestone
Developer: In-house
ETA: June 2015



WITH *RIDE* so recently released, we didn't expect to see Milestone get another *MotoGP* game out so quickly, but here we are looking at the gorgeous visuals of this year's iteration. The usual litany of new customisation modes and career updates are present, as is a new virtual currency called 'GP Credits' that lets players purchase over 100 new accessories by showing excellence in any race mode.

GODZILLA VS

Format: PS4
Publisher: Bandai Namco
Developer: In-house
ETA: 2016



YOU MIGHT have heard about that cool Japan-only *Godzilla* game, and started wondering what you'd done to offend Bandai Namco for the studio to hold it so out of reach. Stop worrying, because the publisher is bringing *Godzilla VS* to PS4 in 2015. Not only will it let you play as the infamous city-destroyer, but it'll also let you pick and choose from a variety of crazy Kaiju too, and take them online to battle others over PSN.

PHANTASY STAR ONLINE 2

Format: PS Vita
Publisher: Sega
Developer: In-house
ETA: TBC (Japan: Out Now/US: TBC)



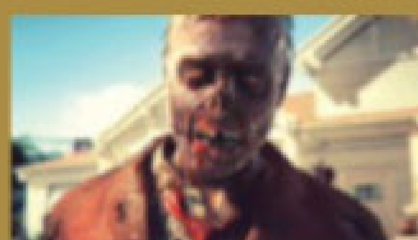
ENOUGH IS enough, Sega. It's almost been a decade since *Phantasy Star Universe*, let alone another entry into the *Phantasy Star Online* side of the MMO world. We had found peace with the fact that we might never receive *PSO2* in the west, but this latest collaboration with Bandai Namco – that sees the introduction of *Tales Of Zestiria* content – has re-ignited our flames of passion.

SQUAD

Format: PC
Publisher: Squad Development Team
Developer: In-house
ETA: 2016

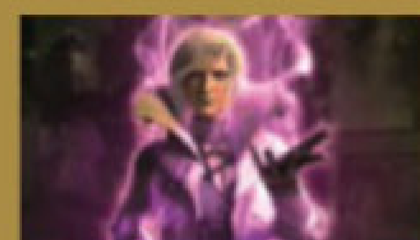


DID YOU ever have the chance to play *Project Reality*? It was the *Battlefield 2* mod that merged the realistic ARMA experience with the chaos of Battlefield. It was a great idea, and now it's being expanded into a standalone experience powered by the Unreal Engine 4. The result is a tactical shooter that features huge maps, 100-player battles and the sort of gameplay that will make any of you lamenting the loss of *SOCOM* giddy.



DELAYED – Dead Island 2 (Multiformat)

After months of radio silence, Deep Silver has gone and delayed Yager's zombie-shooter *Dead Island 2* until 2016, with the explanation that the game needs a bit more time to really fulfil the team's plans for it. Fair enough.

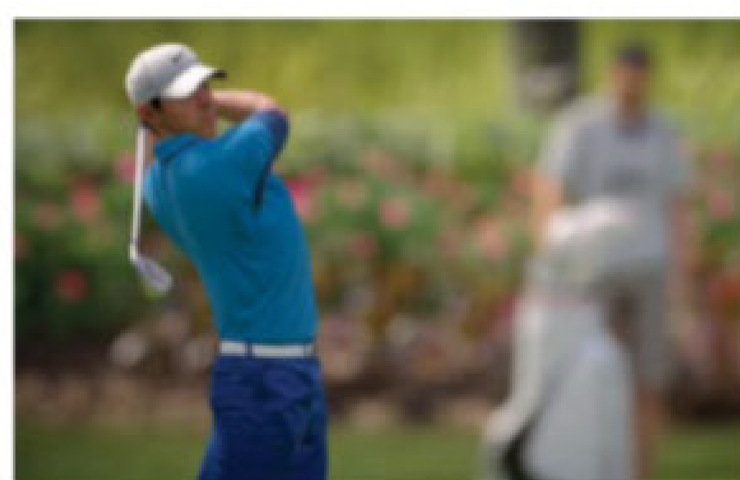


CANCELLED – Phantom Dust (Xbox One)

It was only announced at E3 last year, but apparently things didn't work out for this original Xbox reboot. It's not so great for the team behind it either, as Darkside Games has shut its doors as a result.

RORY MCILROY PGA TOUR

Format: **Xbox One, PlayStation 4**
Publisher: **EA**
Developer: **EA Sports**
ETA: **June 2015**



THE POPULAR *Tiger Woods* golf gaming franchise is back with a new coat of paint and a new cover star, but it looks like EA hasn't been able to secure the all of the licences it once held this time out. The June release window signals the unfortunate loss of the Augusta National Golf Club, otherwise known as the home of The Masters, though EA hasn't ruled out the possibility of it appearing as DLC some time in the future.

GARBAGE DAY

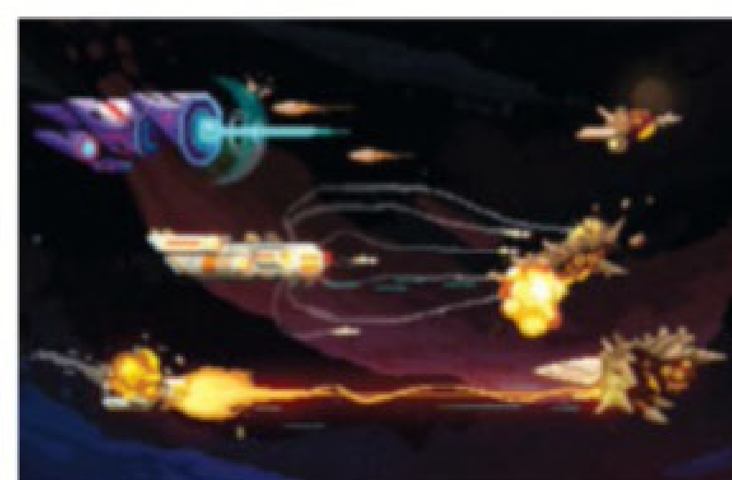
Format: **PC**
Publisher: **Svajunas Žemaitis**
Developer: **In-house**
ETA: **2015**



A BIT like *Groundhog Day*, but with more of a focus on blowing things up and hacking up your neighbours with a katana, *Garbage Day* is in Steam Greenlight as we write this, but we expect it will be past that when you read it. Stuck in a time loop within an open sandbox suburban town, you must investigate what's trapping you and try to break the loop. If you explore ways to die and destroy the world in the meantime, that's just a bonus.

HALCYON 6: STARBASE COMMANDER

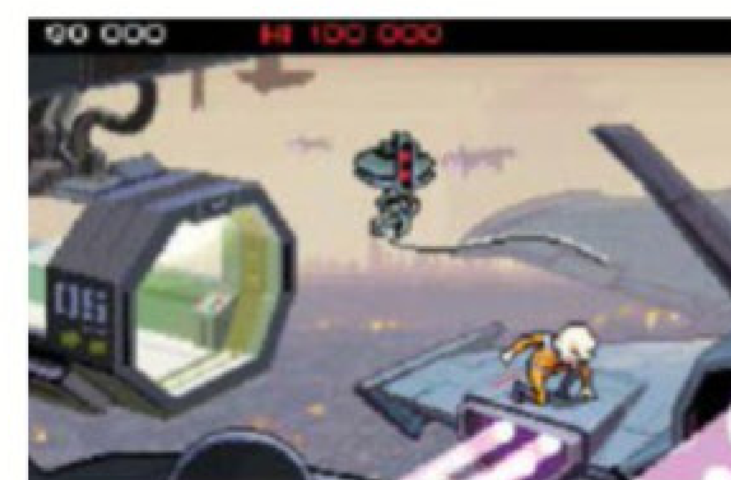
Format: **PC**
Publisher: **Massive Damage**
Developer: **In-house**
ETA: **2015**



IF *FTL* could be considered a fairly successful take on *Star Trek Voyager*, then *Halcyon 6* is the *Deep Space Nine* upgrade. This Kickstarter project is a rogue-like sci-fi strategy survival game that tasks you with maintaining a space station. From there, it's up to you to negotiate trade disputes, upgrade your ship and fight off all sorts of difficult alien threats. It looks fun – we just hope the studio hasn't bitten off more than it can develop.

STARR MAZER

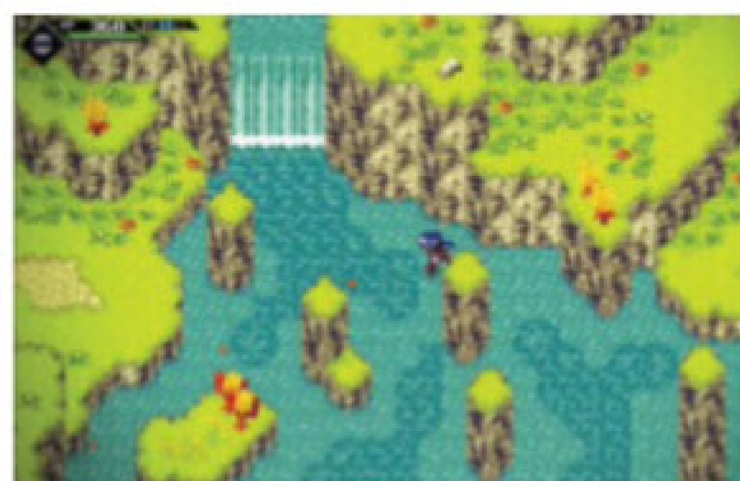
Format: **PC**
Publisher: **Imagos Softworks**
Developer: **In-house**
ETA: **2015**



JUST WHEN we thought we'd had enough of the pixel art aesthetic, Imagos Softworks produces *Starr Mazer*, an indie title that combines a LucasArts-inspired point-and-click adventure with a 2D side-scrolling shoot 'em up. The two genres and retro stylings mesh well, with the bulk of the story developing through tense conversations and quick decision making, while the action throws you through bullet-hell gauntlets.

CROSSCODE

Format: **PC**
Publisher: **Radical Fish Games**
Developer: **In-house**
ETA: **2016**



TAKING THE risk on a crowd-funded project can be difficult, but Radical Fish Games makes it easy with *CrossCode*. The project has been in development for a while, but the studio has released a robust demo that every RPG fanatic should play. This is a 16-bit SNES-styled action-adventure, combining an engrossing world, interesting puzzle and combat mechanics, and a gripping sci-fi story that can't be missed.

ATOM UNIVERSE

Format: **PC, PS4**
Publisher: **Atom Republic**
Developer: **In-house**
ETA: **2015**



GETTING COMPLETELY invested in the potential of VR tech means opening yourself up to new experiences. It represents a future of videogames and means we might never need to leave the house again. *Atom Universe* takes a lovely *Phantasy Star Online* visual vibe and uses it to create a unique VR themepark, filled with a variety of games and rides. It's different, it's fun and it's why we love the potential of VR.

QUANTUM BREAK

Format: **Xbox One**
Publisher: **Microsoft Game Studios**
Developer: **Remedy Games**
ETA: **2016**



QUANTUM BREAK has been pushed into 2016, Microsoft is citing its desire to give the Autumn 2015 release window room to breathe, but this is standard practice for Remedy. We just hope we don't have to wait five years to sample this time-shifting action-adventure – the wait from announcement to release for *Alan Wake* was unbearable. Still, you know what they say, 'a rushed game is bad forever' and all that.

HYPERDRIVE MASSACRE

Format: **Xbox One**
Publisher: **Microsoft Game Studios**
Developer: **34 Big Things**
ETA: **Q3 2015**



THE RETURN of competitive couch co-op over the last few years has been a real delight, so we are happy to see yet another game that's desperate to pit us against our buddies within controller-throwing distance. *Hyperdrive Massacre* is a frantic four-play shooter, initially built on a template of *Asteroids*. It's similar, except the ship has been replaced by a space Cadillac, and the asteroids with friends to frag.



STAR WARS BATTLEFRONT AND BEYOND

DICE takes us back into the cockpit of the most exciting Star Wars series in gaming



"We started working on *Battlefront* a little under two years ago," Lina Ingvarsdottir – DICE's senior producer – tells us. By the time the game's released, that means it would have seen a development cycle of about 30 months. "And it was revealed to the team in a spectacularly cool manner. They called a company meeting (none of us knew what was happening) and we entered the room, lights out and [DICE higher-ups] just started playing *The Imperial March*... and it just went crazy."

"EA and Disney came into this ten-year agreement," Ingvarsdottir continues, explaining the gestation period of *Battlefront*, "with EA creating the *Star Wars* games going forward – *Battlefront* is obviously one of the most beloved of the Star Wars franchises. If you think about the stable of EA studios, DICE comes up as potentially a very good fit."

Ingvarsdottir isn't wrong – when you look at the previous studios that have looked after the *Battlefront* series, DICE seems like the most logical continuation; you've got the likes of Pandemic and Free Radical living on through their work on *Battlefront*, and DICE (with its own engine) is primed to honour its predecessors both spiritually and mechanically. "On the DICE side, when we heard about the deal with Disney, we were like 'Please, we have to do it! [laughs] It has to be us. We want to do it. We'll do it right. We'll make something great out of it!' So DICE, as a studio, really put the stake in the ground and said we want this."

Despite the lack of space combat, you'll still be able to climb into X-wings and engage in dogfights, as long as you keep within the atmosphere.



"WHEN WE HEARD ABOUT THE DEAL WITH DISNEY, WE WERE LIKE 'PLEASE, WE HAVE TO DO IT! WE'LL DO IT RIGHT'"

But good ideas aren't enough to make a good *Star Wars* game – *The Force Unleashed* and its tepid sequel proved that – so DICE's enthusiasm is somewhat reassuring. *Star Wars*, as a series, has some of the most hardcore followers in the world of fandom, and with over 30 years of lore supporting (and shaping) *any* additional fiction, it's not enough to simply 'make a *Star Wars* game'. You've got to have more than good ideas to live up to the benchmark George Lucas established decades ago.

"We are part of continuously creating this Star Wars universe and we have unprecedented access [to it]," explains Ingvarsdottir. "I don't know if you are a *Star Wars* fan but for our team, and for myself, so many of us are *Star Wars* fans..." It's evident – we're talking to Ingvarsdottir at the Star Wars Celebration Event in Anaheim, California, and every member of the DICE team is walking around, rubbing shoulders with *Star Wars* staffers, actors, producers, and cosplaying fans alike. The enthusiasm is palpable – the developers sometimes forget themselves and break face; hearty laughter and enthusiastic giggling can be heard between developers and movie staff.

"To be able to enjoy that access and to talk to these people who bring the franchise forward... to be part of



an event like this, where on one day you reveal the *Force Awakens* trailer and then on the second day you have the *Star Wars Battlefront* trailer… you feel like you've really been given the opportunity to be part of the biggest entertainment event of the year, which is a huge responsibility."

This is the first time Disney and EA have partnered up like this – more notably, it's the first time we've seen a mainstream *Star Wars* film walk out onto the stage hand-in-hand with a videogame portion. *Episode VII: The Force Awakens* isn't simply going to be a film – it's not designed to be released into the world to mop up at the box office to be replaced by whatever is the next big hit. No; this new *Star Wars* trilogy (under the direction of Disney, who has already tried and tested this tactic with the Marvel Cinematic Universe) aims to tackle the world with a multifaceted campaign: videogames and movies won't be separate entities, 'anthology' films and extended universe media won't be held at arms length. Instead, like its Marvel counterpart, everything is planned to weave together, this rich *Star Wars* universe that shares characters, locations, events and operates on a single, unified timeline.

"We need to respect the franchise," Ingvarsdottir admits to us, bluntly. "I think that what we've built shows we respect the franchise; it's in the way that we strive for authenticity." A cursory look at the images illustrating this feature will tell you how authentic DICE has managed to make its *Battlefront* world – not only are the Stormtrooper models as photorealistc as »

Star Wars Games Unit Sales

IN DOLLARS (ADJUSTED FOR INFLATION)



*BEFORE GOING F2P

Star Wars Films Worldwide Income

IN DOLLARS (ADJUSTED FOR INFLATION)



Worldwide Income
Budget



"WE HAVE TO FIND OUR OWN IDENTITY. IT HAS TO BE THE STAR WARS BATTLEFRONT THAT WE WANT TO MAKE"

you'd expect something in the Frostbite engine to be, but the forests of Endor even seem to be filled with the same *shade* of green flora, the lighting on Hoth has the same diffused cloudiness… and it's all running at that now fabled 60 frames per second, processing dynamic lighting, with living fauna scattered amongst the rich flora.

But that's nothing – DICE then gives us a look at the action we can expect from the game. Sadly this pre-alpha showcase is strictly hands-off, but that doesn't mean we can't appreciate the trail of dust the Stormtrooper's speeders leave as they skim the forest floor, the pollen-clouded shafts of sunlight dappling through Bright Tree Village's canopies. Authenticity is a difficult thing to measure, but that hasn't put DICE off. In fact, it's encouraged the studio to try even harder to get everything just right. This is a universe that already exists; you can't take an awful lot of creative freedom here.

"Well I think that as a studio, DICE has a very strong multiplayer pedigree and a very strong *Battlefield* pedigree. And I think in a way that's a blessing but it's also a challenge because we have to find our own voice," reveals Ingvarsdottir. "We have to make the franchise our own. We have to find our own identity. It has to be the *Star Wars Battlefront* that *we* want to make. And I think that the fact that we've had a team that's a mixture of *Battlefield* veterans and new people such as myself, who haven't worked on *Battlefield*, has been good for us in that it has enabled us to create our own prospect and boundaries as to how we want to establish this franchise.

"We need to bring Lucas with us, in the sense that its their franchise," continues Ingvarsdottir. "We get to be part of it, that's important. It's a LucasFilm franchise that we're now partners in helping create so obviously it's a different challenge to working on *Battlefield*, which is a

DICE IP. Or an EA IP I should say, now *Hardline* is a part of it, but traditionally it has been a DICE IP. DICE decides where that goes, usually. But [Star *Wars*] has been going extremely well so far. [LucasFilm] has been a great partner and has let us into the holiest of the holy with the archives and access to all of the people that we work with on a daily basis. We travel to LucasFilm quite often, they come to Stockholm quite often and we try to make sure that they are as aware of the production realities of the game and where we're at, and where we're going."

That isn't to say DICE hasn't been able to expand upon the universe in its own way – how creatively stifling would it be to be inhibited by *only* what's come before, after all? Ingvarsdottir explains to us – as much as she's currently allowed – how DICE manages to creatively operate in a space that's pretty solidly established....

"We really wanted to feel like an authentic immersive *Star Wars* experience and that's also what LucasFilm wanted, so they've been quite receptive to some of our ideas for how we want to bring characters in unexpected ways or, you know, how you experience the game and the sense of meeting these beings. You saw the Sullustan species as an example. You remember Nien Nunb from the movies? We're including species like that in the game as part of our quest for immersion. LucasFilm has supported that."

The thing is, when players think of a *Star Wars* game, the fantasy they want to live is that of a Jedi, struggling with the balance of good and evil, deciding on which side of the Force they should throw down their gauntlet... *Battlefront* doesn't have that. Instead, it's a multiplayer-only affair, focusing on the skirmishes that have shaped the *Star Wars* galaxy. There's no fixed single-player component – this isn't *Knights Of The Old Republic* – so what is DICE planning instead?

Unlike the studio's past *Battlefield* games, *Battlefront* will have a co-operative element that uses split-screen local co-op to take you through a series of famous (or perhaps infamous) *Star Wars* skirmishes – albeit, only from the original trilogy. "The *Star Wars Battlefront* missions are experiences that are heavily inspired by moments in the movies and battle fantasies that are a little bit more personal," Ingvarsdottir explains.

"What we mean by that is we want to give you the experience, we want you to be able to play by yourself, if that's what you want. Your question is whether we wanted it to be only multiplayer, no; this is our take on how we allow you to enjoy the game by yourself or with a friend. We all know that sitting on a couch with a friend, hanging out on a Saturday evening and cracking open a beer and having split-screen fun, that's an awesome experience and we wanted that for this game. It felt right."

So that, for DICE, is a move away from the traditional *Battlefield* approach of one player per console, then. And for an all-inclusive brand like *Star Wars*, that makes sense. It's not as technical in its shooting as DICE's previous efforts – for a start, there's no option to aim down sights »



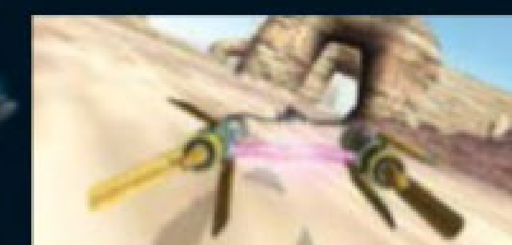
Playable heroes make a return and it's been confirmed only characters from the original trilogy will be selectable. So, no Jar-Jar, then!



We'll find out soon how disposable your characters are. Is it combat without consequence or something a bit more tactical in the DICE tradition?

It's Not All Lightsabers & Blasters

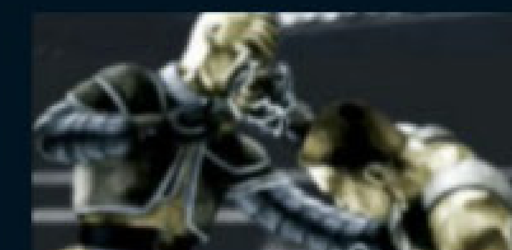
The *Star Wars* extended universe has far more going for it than just the combat – *Battlefront* is by no means all we can expect to see from EA and Disney now that the franchise is on the eve of resurrection...



Podracing

Racing at speeds topping 560mph, Podracing is a lethal racing sport that tests reflexes, courage and the body in general. Anakin Skywalker is the only human to have ever won a podrace (winning his freedom in the process), but imagine how much fun we could all have if a game let us strap ourselves into one of those terrifying one-person cockpits. We need this on new-gen consoles.

Recommended developers: Criterion, Sumo Digital
Recommended platforms: Vita, Arcade



Shockboxing

A more obscure sport, certainly, Shockboxing was popularised in *Star Wars: The Roleplaying Game*, and revolves around two combatants going at it in a traditional boxing ring, except with electrified metal gauntlets attached to their wrists. It'd make for a pretty cool addition in a weapons-based fighting game, wouldn't it, Harada?

Recommended developers: Project Soul, Arc System Works
Recommended platforms: Console



Blob Racing

Blob Racing was a betting sport carried out on the planet Tattooine, tasking 'players' with racing gelatinous Umhullian blobs through obstacle courses; over nails, through mesh screens and so on. Punishment for cheating (ie using illegal chemicals to increase your blob's viscosity) was punished with a permanent contract... as Jabba the Hutt's love slave. High stakes indeed.

Recommended developers: Sega, Zeptolabs
Recommended platforms: iOS, Android

A Big Step Backwards?

While we are incredibly excited to see what DICE can do with the *Star Wars* universe once it's up and running in the Frostbite engine, there are some missing features when held up against the previous two instalments of *Battlefront*. As such, we sat down and picked apart exactly what's different, and if it'll actually have *that* much of an effect on the final product…

The Single-Player Campaign

What's missing?

The first two *Star Wars Battlefront* games came with a tacked-on campaign – it was mostly knitted together with scrolling text exposition dumps, and the 'story' was comprised of a series of maps (populated with AI bots) while you fulfilled various vague objectives.

Does it matter?

The new *Battlefront* has a selection of co-op missions that seem to fuse together to form a coherent story, set somewhere between *Episode IV* and *V*. The 'stories' in the original games weren't all that much to write home about, but at least they had single-player content.

Space Dog Fighting

What's missing?

In *Battlefront II*, you could take to the stars above various planets and engage your enemies in zero-G combat, using X-Wings, TIE Fighters, etc. You had to blast your way through to the enemy hangar, infiltrate the ship and overload their engines – all before you run out of units.

Does it matter?

Yes. The lack of space fighting will be a big loss for us in *Battlefront* – it was by far our favourite part of the pre-rebooted series, and remains unique in gaming. We're still hoping DICE and EA might drop this whole feature in as DLC, post-launch.

64 Player Matches

What's missing?

32v32 deathmatches were the norm on the previous games, making the action feel frantic and deadly – one wrong turn would see you gunned down like Bantha. The player cap in the new game is 40 people – 20v20 – which might lack the punch of the previous battles…

Does it matter?

Not really – the bots in the original games padded out numbers, but they weren't exactly smart. Now, at least, there will be around 20 *real* players on each side – the potential for big-team tactics and match winning last-minute rallies abounds.

AT-AT Walkers

What's missing?

The *Battlefront* games introduced the ability to spawn out of (and control) the Empire's iconic AT-AT walkers. Simply walking over an enemy would crush them, and when you had two Rebels tying up your legs with space rope? That's the *Star Wars* experience we're after…

Does it matter?

Not really – the AT-ATs are in the game, at least, and they can carve out a path of destruction as they walk a predetermined route. It wouldn't be fun playing against player-controlled AT-ATs, anyway; balancing a juggernaut of that size would be horrendous.

"We respected the legacy of Battlefront and took it into account"

(ADS); like the original *Battlefront*; the decision has been made to keep your guns at an arm's length to give a sense of breezy action to the firefights you'll be getting involved in. Of course, more skill-specific items like the sniper and maybe some battle rifles will let you zoom in on the scopes, but it isn't the norm, that's for sure. By keeping you focused on the action around you, the game implicitly puts more of an emphasis on movement and navigation, using the environment to your advantage.

On that note, DICE is also letting players flip between first- and third-person points of view at will – another nod to legacy *Battlefront* mechanics. But is that always the best decision – keeping the old traditions alive two console generations after they were introduced? "This is a beloved franchise, and I think the fact it's two generations of consoles old means there's a lot of players that will play this game that haven't played those older games," explains Ingvarsdottir. "There are probably a lot of fans that will be waiting impatiently for this game, too, though. What we did, then, is some of us from the team played the games quite a lot, so obviously we took a look at it, but we did not feel like we were



The game won't just revolve around death matches. Expect all the genre staples; capture the flag, domination, free-for-all, and more.

obliged to implement solutions and features from the old games wholesale into this game. We had a heritage and a legacy to live up to and respect and that's what we feel we did. We respected the legacy of *Battlefront* and took it into account going forward."

In the boxout to the left, we've highlighted what isn't in DICE's newest effort that has been in previous instalments – at the time of writing, there's a backlash against DICE for the features they're dropping, some columns even recommending players boycott pre-ordering the game. We wouldn't go that far – the PS2 and Xbox systems (that the first games were released on) had *massive* technical limitations, and DICE is planning to innovate in areas where those games were weak. However, the new generation of systems can't run, say, space battles, while pumping out 1080p graphics at 60 frames per second, so there's inevitably going to be a compromise. DICE believes it made the best calls with the hand it was dealt.

"I think there's just something to be said for experience, in terms of having iterated on shooters over such a long period of time, having developed what is one of the most successful shooter franchises of all time [in *Battlefield*]. I think, in terms of knowledge and experience, that is unmatched. There are very few studios in the world that have that and to be able to apply to another shooter franchise is pretty epic.

"I wouldn't say that it has been difficult, making [*Battlefront*] in the sense that we've had the obvious answers to everything, the *Battlefield* answers, but it's still a challenge in the sense that you have to discover what it is that makes the new *Battlefront Battlefront*. Apart from coming from a [studio that's used to making *Battlefield*], it's hard for any game to find its voice, its direction: you build something and you've taken something from a concept to quite far.

"You saw the gameplay." Ingvarsdottir says, gesturing to the monitor. "This was running on PS4, so obviously we're quite far into production on the game and it's a rapid pace. It's a challenging franchise and we need to make it in a way that we feel like it's our own thing. I think coming off what we've shown today, in my eyes, we've absolutely succeeded at giving *Battlefront* its own identity. Someone said – one of the people who got to play it early in its development – that it feels like it's 'born of *Star Wars*'. And to us, that was a very, very good thing to hear and very reassuring in terms of 'Yes, we found our voice, we found our tone'."



AT-AT Walkers will be a prominent part of the Battlefront maps; travelling a pre-determined path, pressuring your movements.

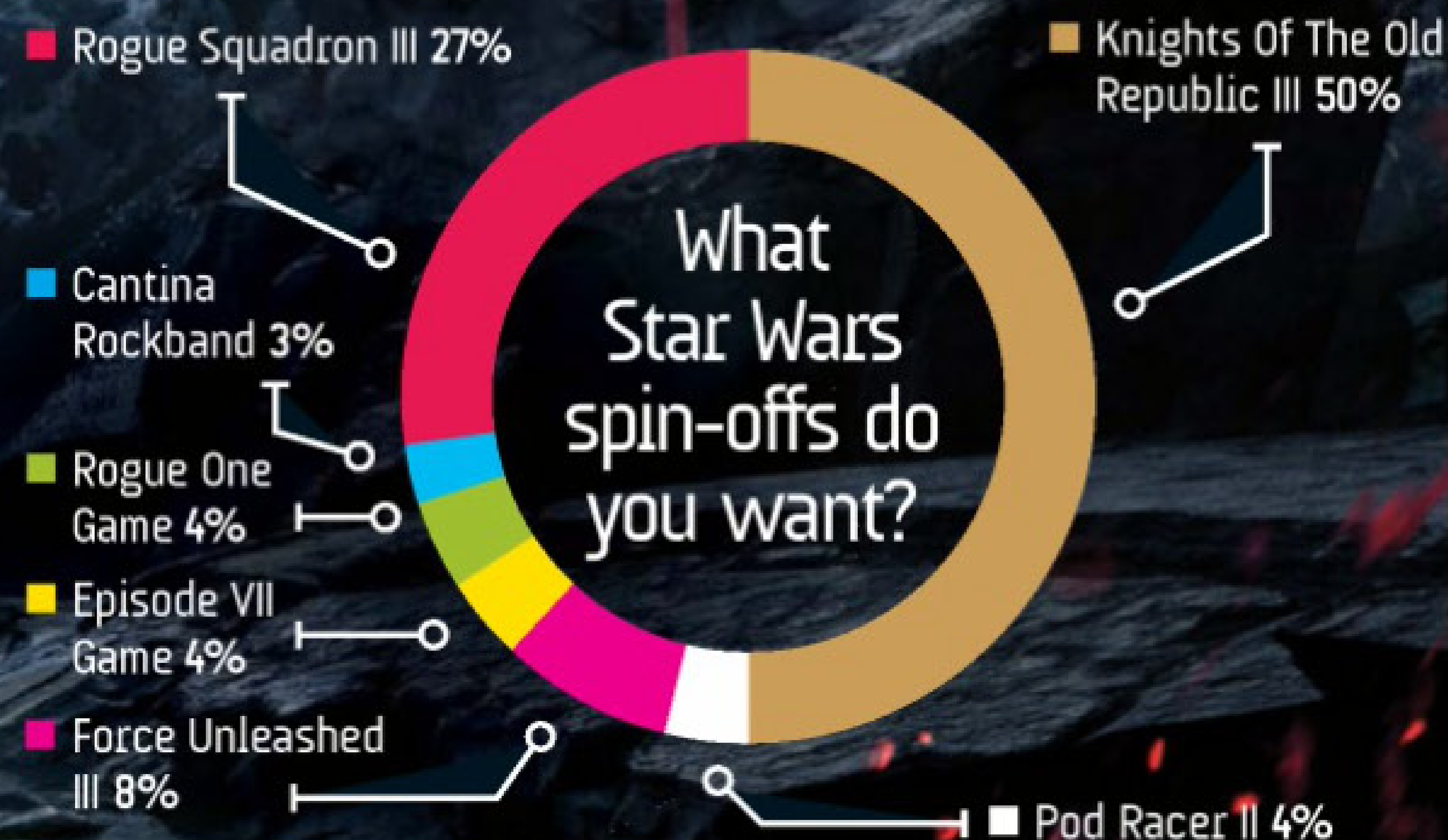
It's hard to argue with that logic as you see a rebel fighter flinch slightly as an explosion against the side of the cover he's behind gets hit with an explosive. It's hard to argue with that as you see an Imperial Speeder zoom over the water, leaving a rippling trail in its wake. It's hard to argue with that when you hear *that* pew-pew blaster sound pinging out of cinema speakers as a Stromtrooper fires off his gun. It might not be *exactly* what everyone in the universe wanted from a *Battlefront* game, but there's more than enough in there to appease even the most hardcore *Star Wars* fan, whilst satiating even the most devout console-playing FPS aficionado.

DICE cut its teeth on *Battlefield*, and has worked through enough rises and falls in the industry to understand *exactly* how gamers work. After seeing the game in action, and witnessing the resulting furore by a couple of vocal online communities that have only reacted to a short trailer, we must say, we find their lack of faith... disturbing.

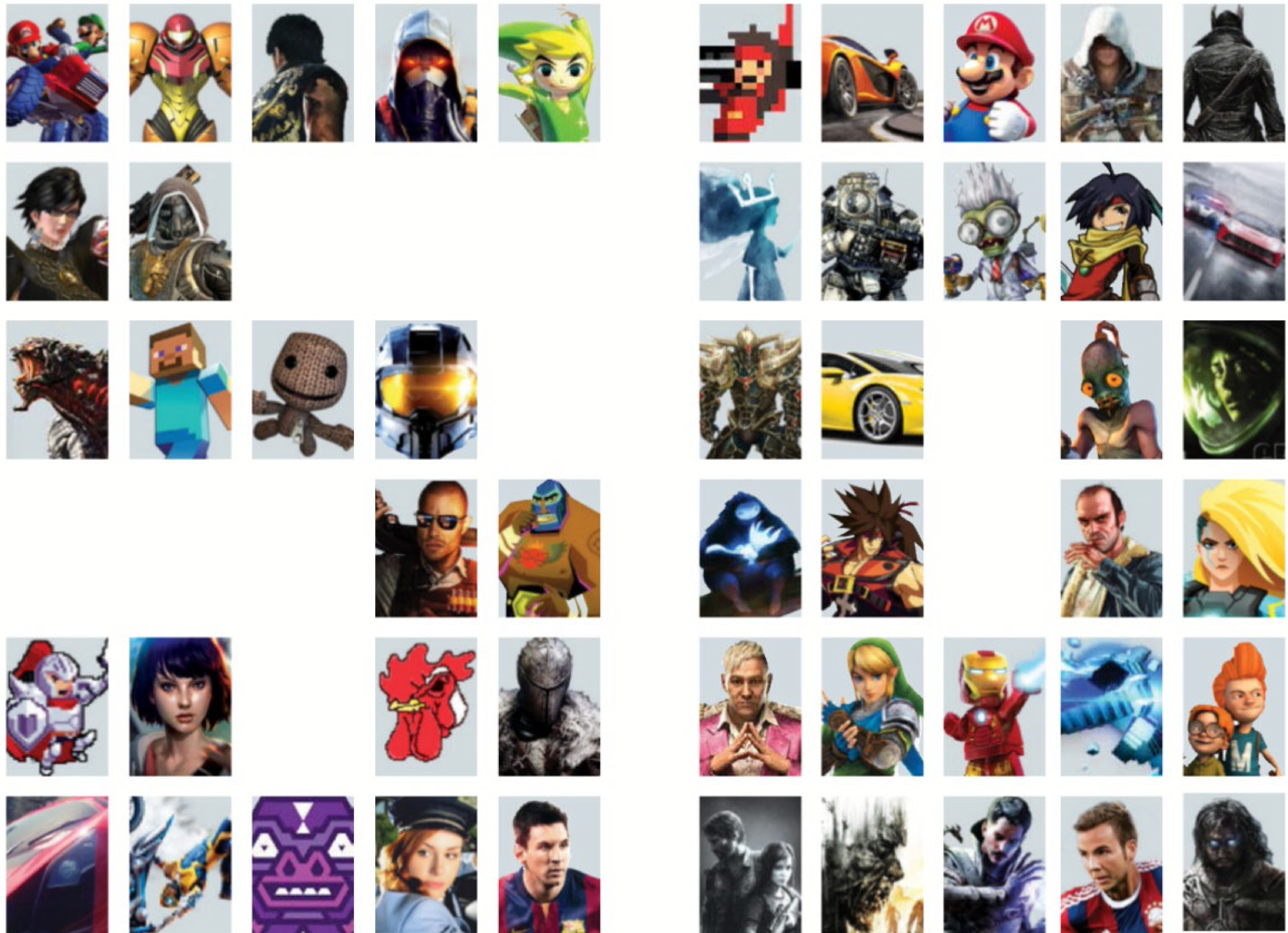


Reader Survey

Your pick for the games Disney should launch next in the SW universe



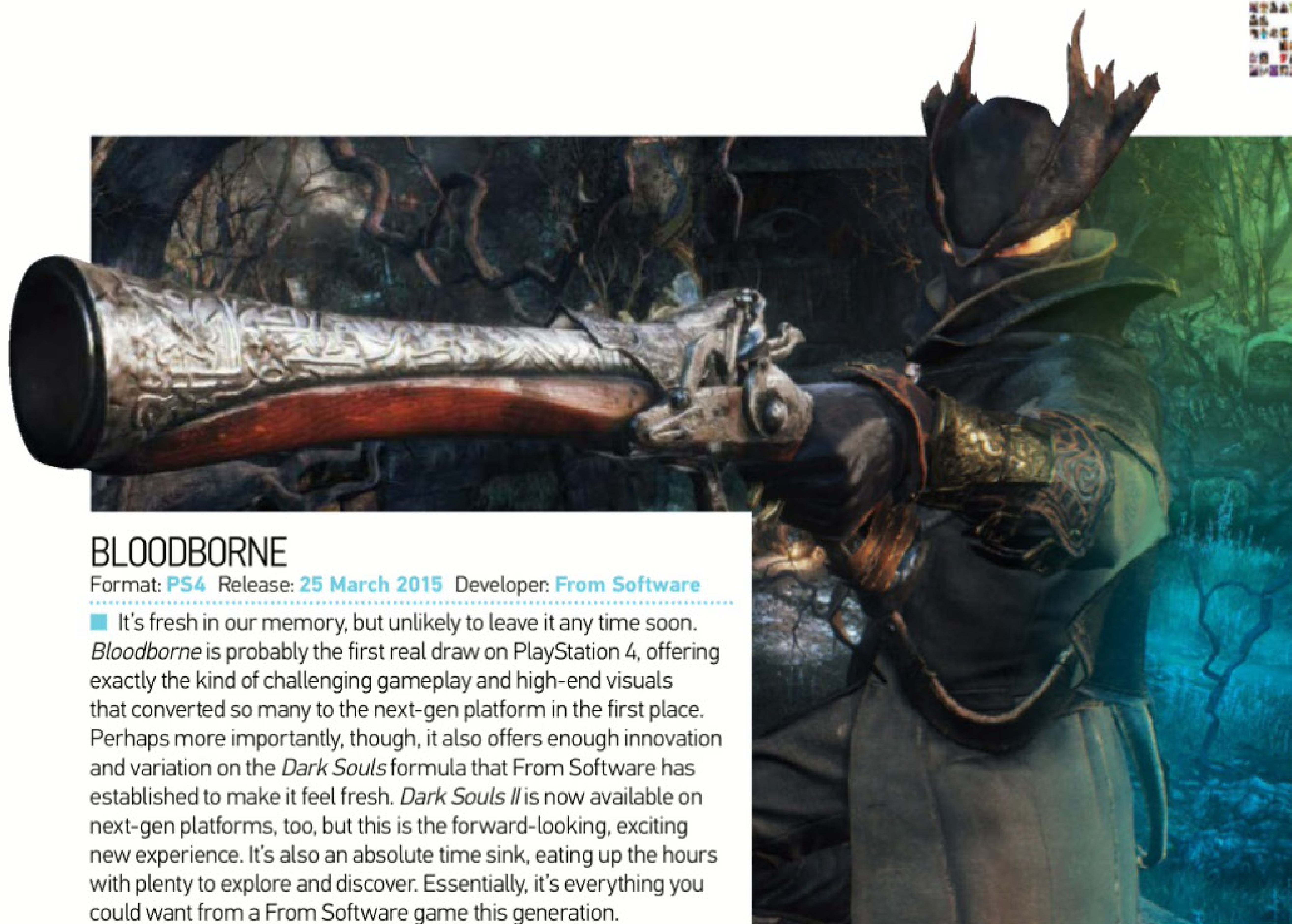
games™



MUST-PLAY GAMES OF THE GENERATION

18 MONTHS SINCE THE LAUNCH OF THE PS4 AND XBOX ONE, THERE'S ALREADY A WIDE ARRAY OF FANTASTIC EXPERIENCES TO ENJOY AND A FAIR FEW APPEARING ON THE WII U AS WELL





BLOODBORNE

Format: **PS4** Release: **25 March 2015** Developer: **From Software**

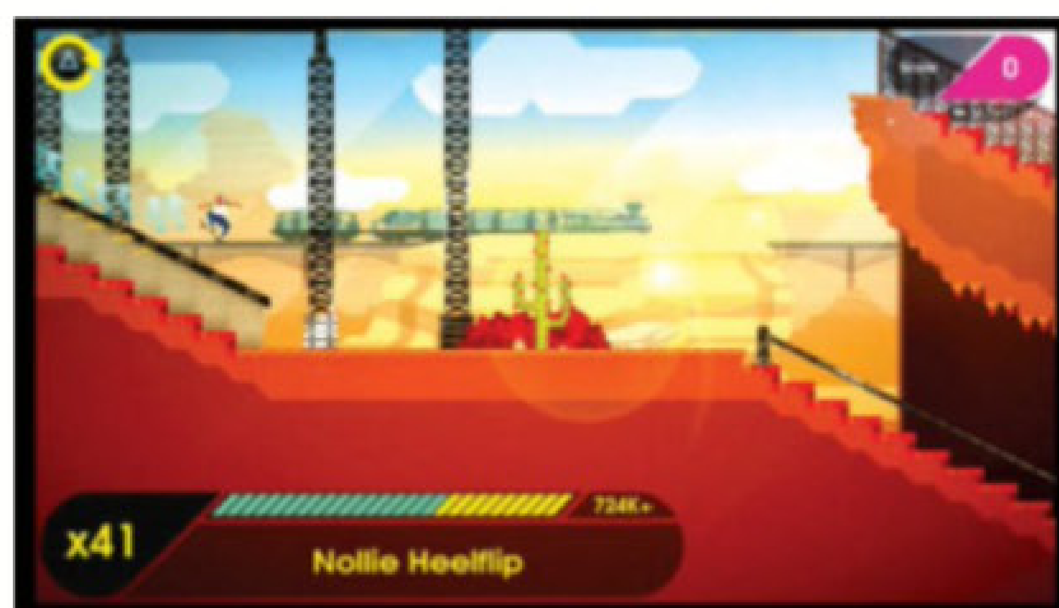
It's fresh in our memory, but unlikely to leave it any time soon. *Bloodborne* is probably the first real draw on PlayStation 4, offering exactly the kind of challenging gameplay and high-end visuals that converted so many to the next-gen platform in the first place. Perhaps more importantly, though, it also offers enough innovation and variation on the *Dark Souls* formula that From Software has established to make it feel fresh. *Dark Souls II* is now available on next-gen platforms, too, but this is the forward-looking, exciting new experience. It's also an absolute time sink, eating up the hours with plenty to explore and discover. Essentially, it's everything you could want from a From Software game this generation.



LIFE IS STRANGE

Format: **Multi** Release: **30 January 2015**
Developer: **Dontnod Entertainment**

As we write this, *Life Is Strange* is still unfolding, but we're already hooked on what has proven to be the most intriguing and enticing episodic title released so far this generation. We're hooked, waiting breathlessly for the next instalment, and isn't that what episodic gaming is supposed to do? An essential experience.



OLLIOLLI 2: WELCOME TO OLLIWOOD

Format: **PS4** Release: **4 March 2015**
Developer: **Roll7**

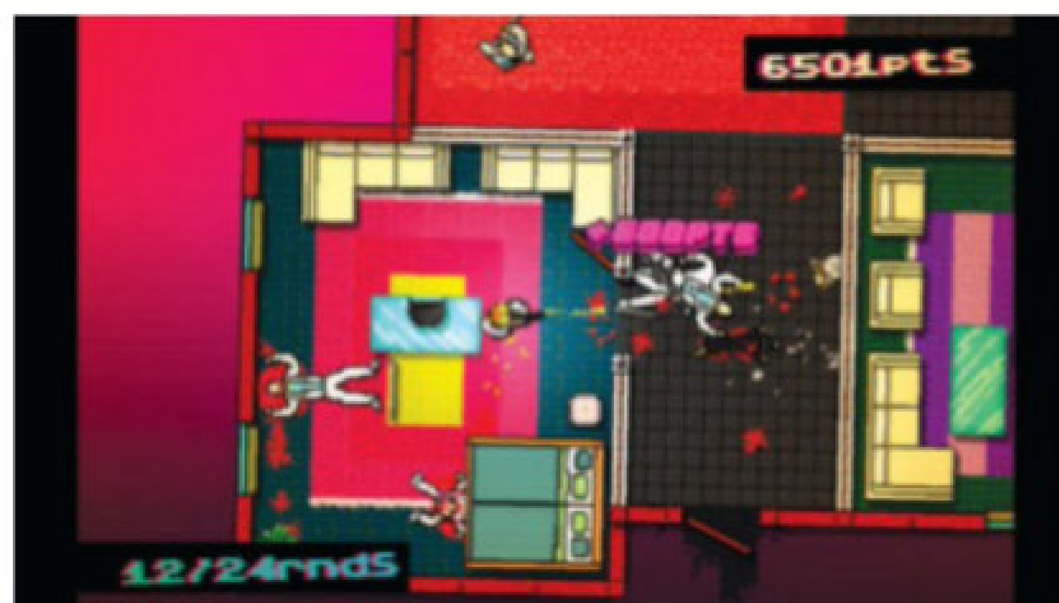
We loved the original *OlliOlli* and while it was clear what it was missing, we didn't think it would leap so far forward with this sequel. With the addition of manuals to chain combos and some really superb level design, *OlliOlli 2* is a masterpiece of just-one-more-go gaming that refuses to be put down.



ROGUE LEGACY

Format: **PS4** Release: **30 July 2014**
Developer: **Cellar Door Games**

With roguelike death, punishing bosses and a great sense of humour, *Rogue Legacy* is one of our favourite things to play in PS4. As you restart after death with a descendent of your fallen warrior, picking the one with the best or least bad character trait, this is smart indie gaming with a real heart.



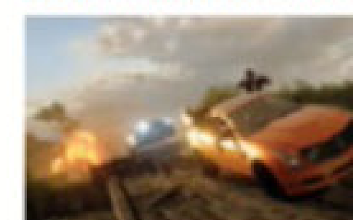
HOTLINE MIAMI 2: WRONG NUMBER

Format: **PS4** Release: **10 March 2015**
Developer: **Dennaton Games**

Building on a great template, Dennaton upped the crazy and the commentary for this brutally violent and utterly addictive shooter. The trial and error gameplay remains as infuriating and rewarding as ever as you develop the reflexes and insight to make it through a level in one piece. It's bloody brilliant.

BATTLEFIELD: HARDLINE

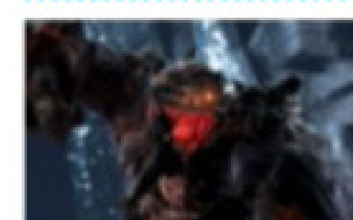
Format: **Multi** Release: **19 March 2015**
Developer: **Visceral Games**



The single-player may still leave a little to be desired, and we still can't explain where all those handcuffs come from, but with multiplayer modes like Hotwire and Crosshair, this was a new level of intensity and excitement for the series.

EVOLVE

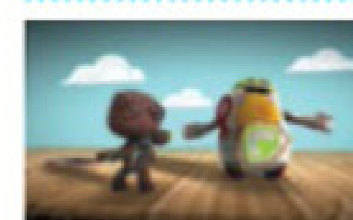
Format: **Multi** Release: **10 February 2015**
Developer: **Turtle Rock Studios**



Ignore all the noise about DLC and concentrate on the core team-focused co-op for a moment and *Evolve* is a very special game. As long as you have a strong team unit and you're not up against a Wraith monster, it's still a fantastic shooter experience.

LITTLEBIGPLANET 3

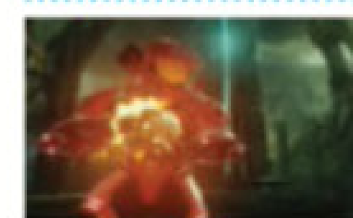
Format: **PS4** Release: **26 November 2014**
Developer: **Sumo Digital**



Out of the hands of Media Molecule, but still a playground for the imagination, Sumo's *LittleBigPlanet 3* did a fine job integrating its story mode with teaching players how to use the tools. Play, Create and Share have never been blended better than they were here.

HALO: THE MASTER CHIEF COLLECTION

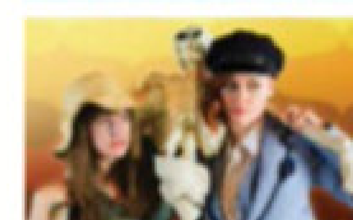
Format: **Xbox One**
Release: **11 November 2014**
Developer: **343 Industries**



It may still be having its issues, but it's hard to argue that this isn't the best value collection of games on next-gen at the moment. These four *Halo* campaigns alone are still very good value and once you're in a game online, it's still a lot of fun.

ROUNDABOUT

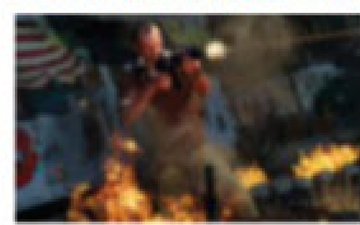
Format: **Xbox One**
Release: **20 February 2015**
Developer: **No Goblin**



Probably the most bizarre indie game released this generation, we instantly fell in love with the spinning limousine gameplay and hammy acting of *Roundabout*. It brings to mind some of the best score-chasing and combo-chaining games we've ever played.

GRAND THEFT AUTO V

Format: Multi
Release: 18 November 2014
Developer: Rockstar North



Now fully operational on PC and enjoying some extra features on PS4 and Xbox One, this is the fullest version of *GTA V* available and thanks to Heists there's a massive reason to grab some friends and dip back into Los Santos.

DARK SOULS II: SCHOLAR OF THE FIRST SIN

Format: Multi Release: 2 April 2015
Developer: From Software



This isn't a massive upgrade on the last-gen version of the game, but the added grunt of the newer consoles make wandering around Drangleic a much smoother experience. *Dark Souls II* remains an immense game to get into and it's worth starting with this version.

THE LAST OF US REMASTERED

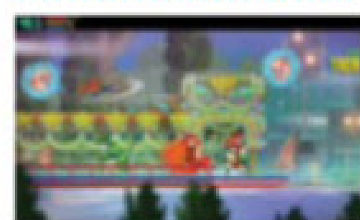
Format: PS4 Release: 30 July 2014
Developer: Naughty Dog



We didn't want to get too hung up on remasters and remakes, but this is the definitive version of one of the best games of the last decade, so it's tough to skip it here. *The Last Of Us* remains a great adventure and a wonderful story to get into.

GUACAMELEE! SUPER TURBO CHAMPIONSHIP EDITION

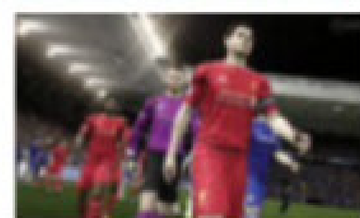
Format: Multi Release: 2 July 2014
Developer: DrinkBox Studios



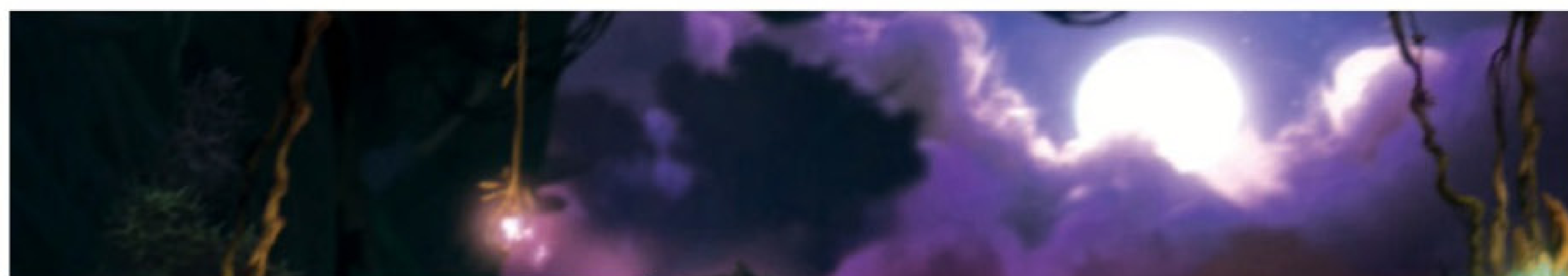
An excellent example of a PS Vita game being given a really excellent upgrade for consoles, *Guacamelee!*'s metroidvania gameplay and wonderful art style combine to make another excellent action adventure for this generation.

FIFA 15

Format: Multi
Release: 25 September 2014
Developer: EA Canada



EA keeps delivering fine incremental improvements to *FIFA* each year, so it's no wonder this is the best so far. It's a shame that Ultimate Team has been chipped away at in recent months, but the core game is rock solid.

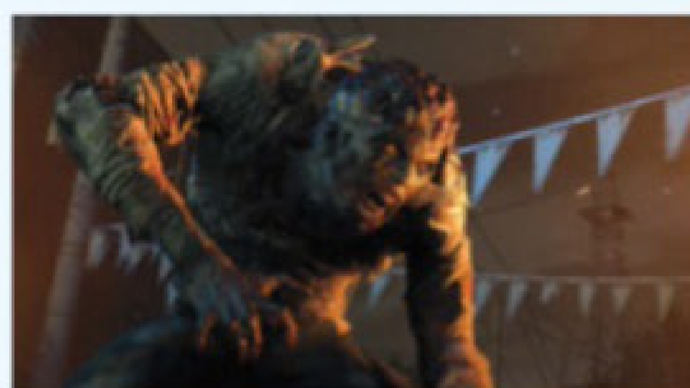




ORI AND THE BLIND FOREST

Format: Xbox One Release: 11 March 2015
Developer: Moon Studios

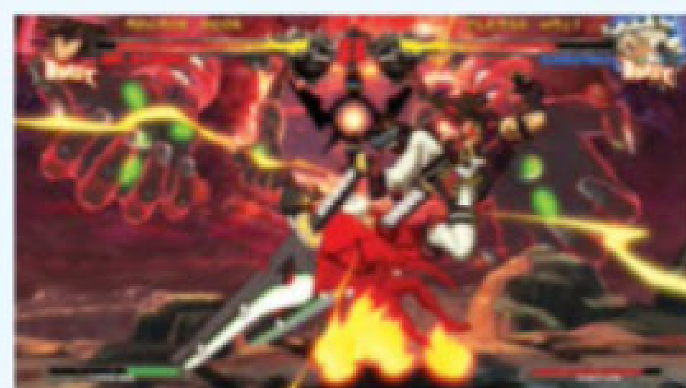
It takes something special for an indie game to break through the triple-A noise, and that's exactly what *Ori* has done. While it looks like a mix of *Rayman* and Studio Ghibli, it in fact has more in common with *Super Meat Boy*. The visuals set a delightful tone, and then the punishing precision platforming takes over. *Ori And The Blind Forest* is tough and unapologetic, but thoroughly enthralling. Once it gets its hooks into you, it's tough to walk away. While there have been an array of fine indie games on the Xbox One already, this is the first really great one to come through the ID@Xbox platform and deliver on its promise.



DYING LIGHT

Format: Multi
Release: 27 January 2015
Developer: Techland

We love a game that feels like you're playing through the best of bloody B-movie violence, and we definitely love a game that embraces its oddities and weaknesses to turn them into virtues. *Dying Light* has odd logic, sometimes bizarre physics, insane plot and mad weapons, but it's also utterly brilliant to play and packed full of emergent moments.



GUILTY GEAR XRD -SIGN-

Format: PS4
Release: 16 December 2014 (US)
Developer: Arc System Works

The first really great fighter of the generation (sorry, *Killer Instinct*). We've yet to see a European release of this 2D treat from Arc System Works, but you can pick it up from the US pretty easy. And we should clarify, that while it looks 2D it is of course made from 3D models, which just makes its looks even more impressive.



KALIMBA

Format: Xbox One
Release: 17 December 2014
Developer: Press Play

Of all the indie games to be released on Xbox One so far, this was easily the biggest surprise. It looks like a simple enough multi-character platformer with a few totems, but in actuality it's one of the best puzzle platformers we've played in years. Navigating around these colour-coded levels, switching and leaping to keep the totems alive, is utterly engrossing.





SUPER SMASH BROS. FOR WII U

Format: Wii U Release: 28 November 2014
Developer: Sora Ltd

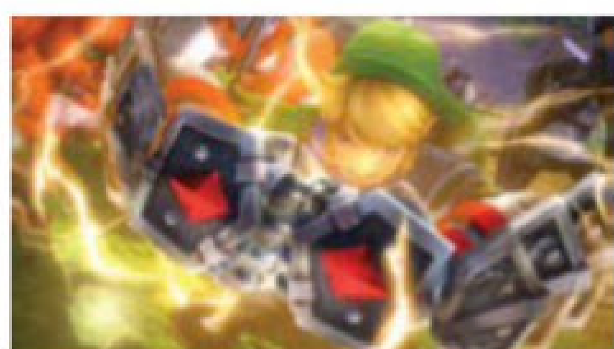
Smash Bros has an aura of obsession around it, born mostly from those who fell in love with it as their first fighter experience most likely, but the anarchic fun hasn't dwindled with age. The abuse thrown between friends, the seeming injustice of it and the mass of your favourite characters make it the ultimate Nintendo fan experience.



FAR CRY 4

Format: Multi Release: 18 November 2014
Developer: Ubisoft Montreal

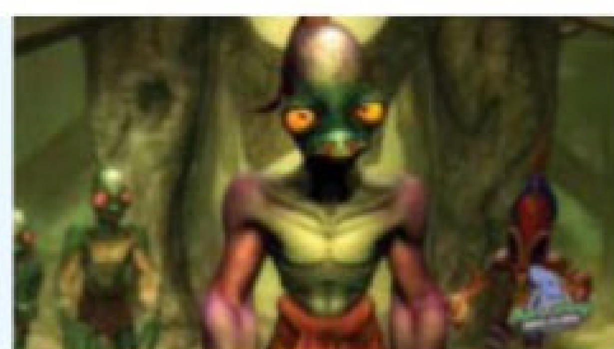
There wasn't a huge amount changed from the last *Far Cry* in the making of this one, except perhaps it got out of its own way a little more. The story was less insistent that you pay attention to it, which freed up the sandbox experience to completely envelope you. The creative chaos of this game is really something.



HYRULE WARRIORS

Format: **Wii U**
Release: **19 September 2014**
Developer: **Omega Force**

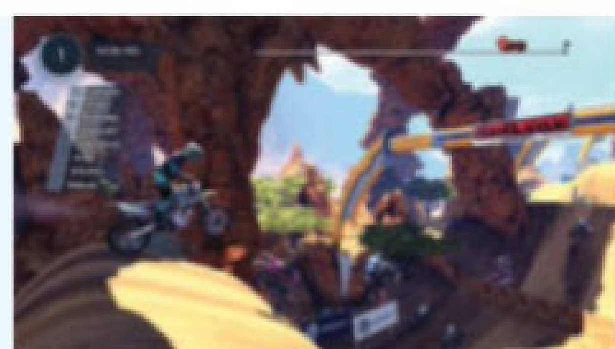
Handing the fantasy world of Hyrule over to the guys who make the *Dynasty Warriors* games might have seemed like sacrilege to many, but actually *Hyrule Warriors* shows just how strong the *Zelda* universe is, and how flexible it can be. *Hyrule Warriors* is manic fun of the best variety.



ODDWORLD: NEW 'N' TASTY

Format: **Multi**
Release: **22 July 2014**
Developer: **Just Add Water**

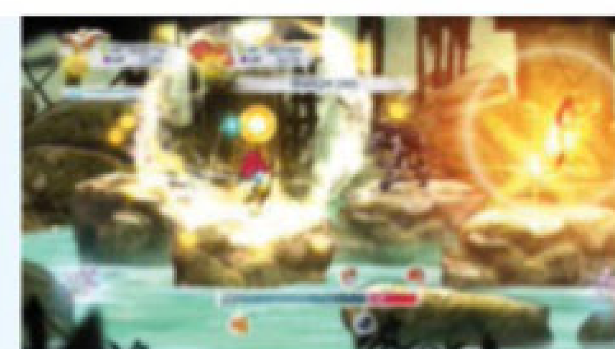
Abe's return is a very welcome one, and now both PS4 and Xbox One gamers get to enjoy it. This series has always been something of a favourite of ours and it's lost nothing over the years, as *New 'N' Tasty* proved. This is still puzzle platforming excellence.



TRIALS FUSION

Format: **Multi**
Release: **16 April 2014**
Developer: **RedLynx**

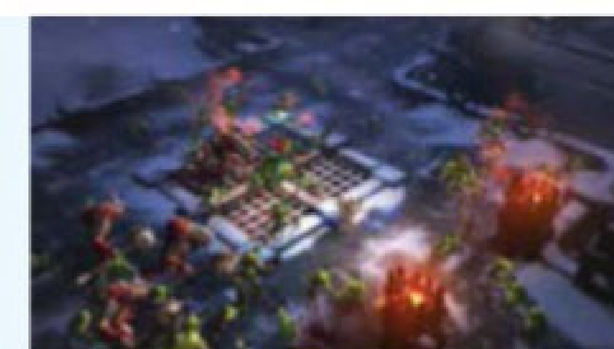
Another superbly addictive experience this generation, *Trials Fusion*'s addition of tricks in a fresh sci-fi world created some of the most insane bike runs we've ever attempted. There's been little that's more satisfying this generation than landing a Superman backflip. Awesome stuff.



CHILD OF LIGHT

Format: **Multi**
Release: **30 April 2014**
Developer: **Ubisoft Montreal**

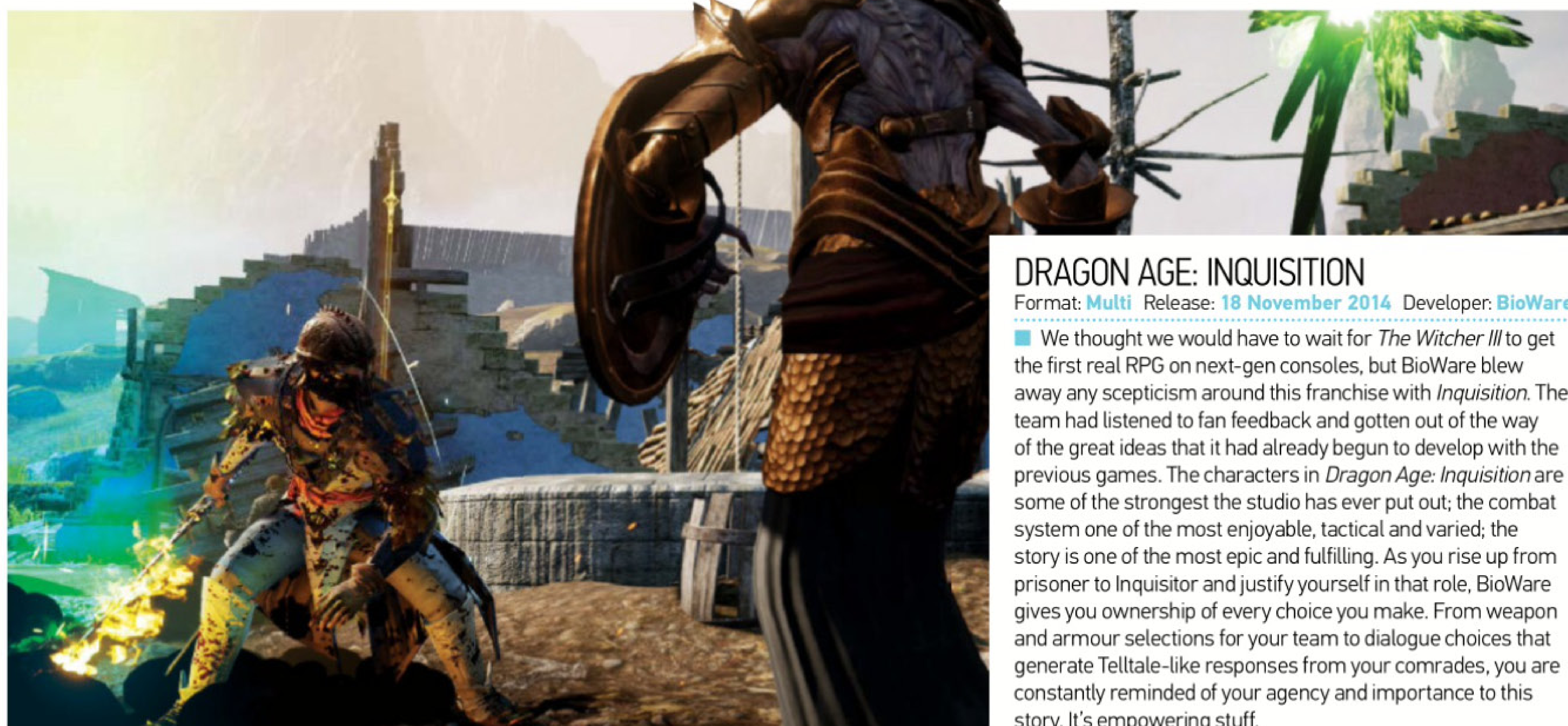
Proving that the traditional Japanese RPG formula can still work in the modern era (and that it doesn't take a studio in Japan to do it) the *Far Cry* team at Ubisoft were given a little creative leeway and with it took full advantage of the artistic UbiArt engine to make a truly excellent new game.



DIABLO III: REAPER OF SOULS

Format: **Multi**
Release: **19 August 2014**
Developer: **Blizzard Entertainment**

We like to think of Blizzard's excellent loot-a-thon as a party game for the hardcore gamer, which might seem a little odd, but just gather on a sofa together to play and you'll get it. On the new consoles it's bigger, better and bolder.



DRAGON AGE: INQUISITION

Format: **Multi** Release: **18 November 2014** Developer: **BioWare**

We thought we would have to wait for *The Witcher III* to get the first real RPG on next-gen consoles, but BioWare blew away any scepticism around this franchise with *Inquisition*. The team had listened to fan feedback and gotten out of the way of the great ideas that it had already begun to develop with the previous games. The characters in *Dragon Age: Inquisition* are some of the strongest the studio has ever put out; the combat system one of the most enjoyable, tactical and varied; the story is one of the most epic and fulfilling. As you rise up from prisoner to Inquisitor and justify yourself in that role, BioWare gives you ownership of every choice you make. From weapon and armour selections for your team to dialogue choices that generate Telltale-like responses from your comrades, you are constantly reminded of your agency and importance to this story. It's empowering stuff.



FORZA HORIZON 2

Format: **Xbox One** Release: **3 October 2014**
Developer: **Playground Games**

And the award for most improved sequel probably has to go to Playground's action racer. While the original *Horizon* was fun enough, this open-world, online racer was a class above. In fact, it was probably the best exclusive game to be released in late 2014. That doesn't sound right… but we can't think of a better one.



PES 2015

Format: **Multi** Release: **13 November 2014**
Developer: **PES Productions**

PES is back! We've wanted to say that for so many years that it's been on the tip of our tongue every time a new *Pro Evo* launches. But this year, it finally felt like we could say it and not have to defend it. There's some room to improve and polish, but this is the smoothest and most consistent *PES* we've played in a long time.



DRIVECLUB

Format: **PS4** Release: **10 October 2014**
Developer: **Evolution Studios**

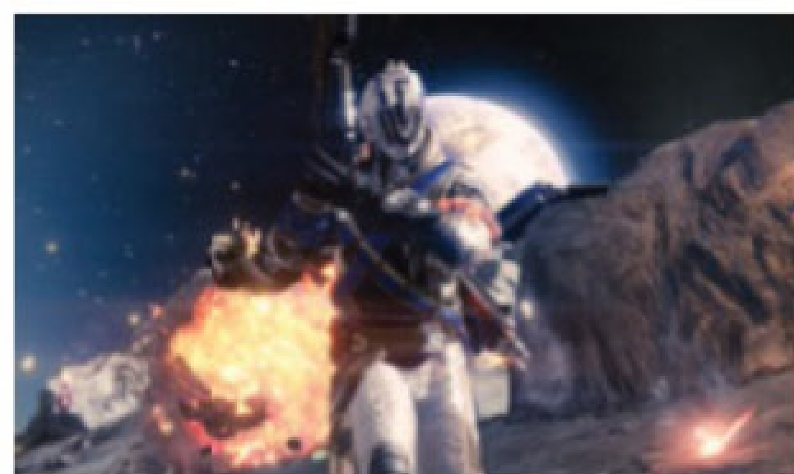
It had its launch troubles, but *DriveClub* has been updated and is now delivering the connected racing experience that it always promised that it would do. If you haven't gone back to it since launch then put your doubt on the shelf for a moment and retrieve your copy of this game. We think you'll like what you find.



LEGO MARVEL SUPER HEROES

Format: **Multi** Release: **29 November 2014** Developer: **TT Games**

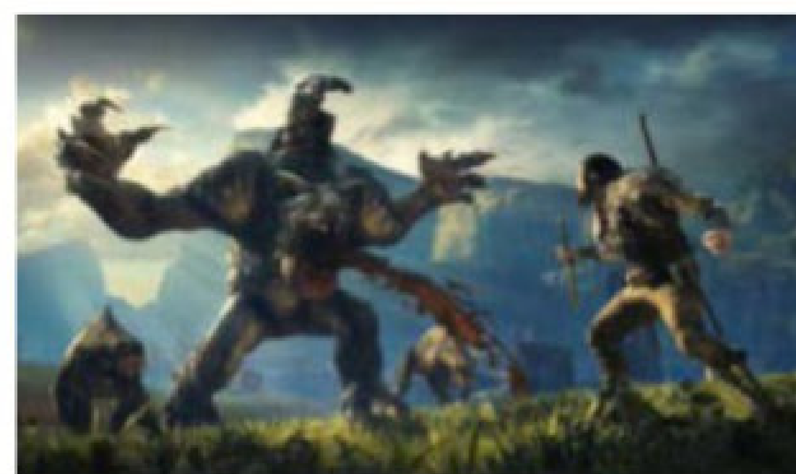
There wasn't anything particularly unique about this LEGO game, drawing largely on the gameplay already established, but the perfect combination of Marvel heroes with the humour and core mechanics of this series just lifted everything up a level. These games have always been good, but this is the best.



DESTINY

Format: **Multi**
Release: **9 September 2014**
Developer: **Bungie**

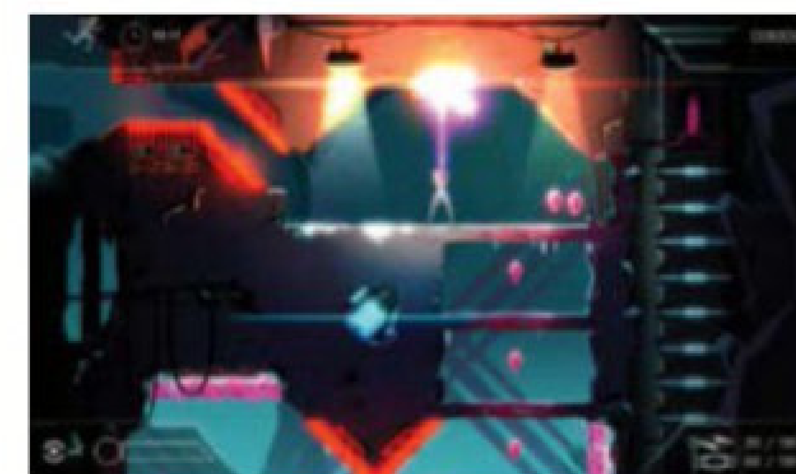
It might not have been exactly the shooter experience everyone was expecting, but if you can embrace the mechanics and pacing of *Destiny* then it's one of the most rewarding multiplayer games available this generation. The loot-hunting, grinding and adventuring is everything we could have hoped for.



MIDDLE-EARTH: SHADOW OF MORDOR

Format: **Multi** Release: **3 October 2014**
Developer: **Monolith Productions**

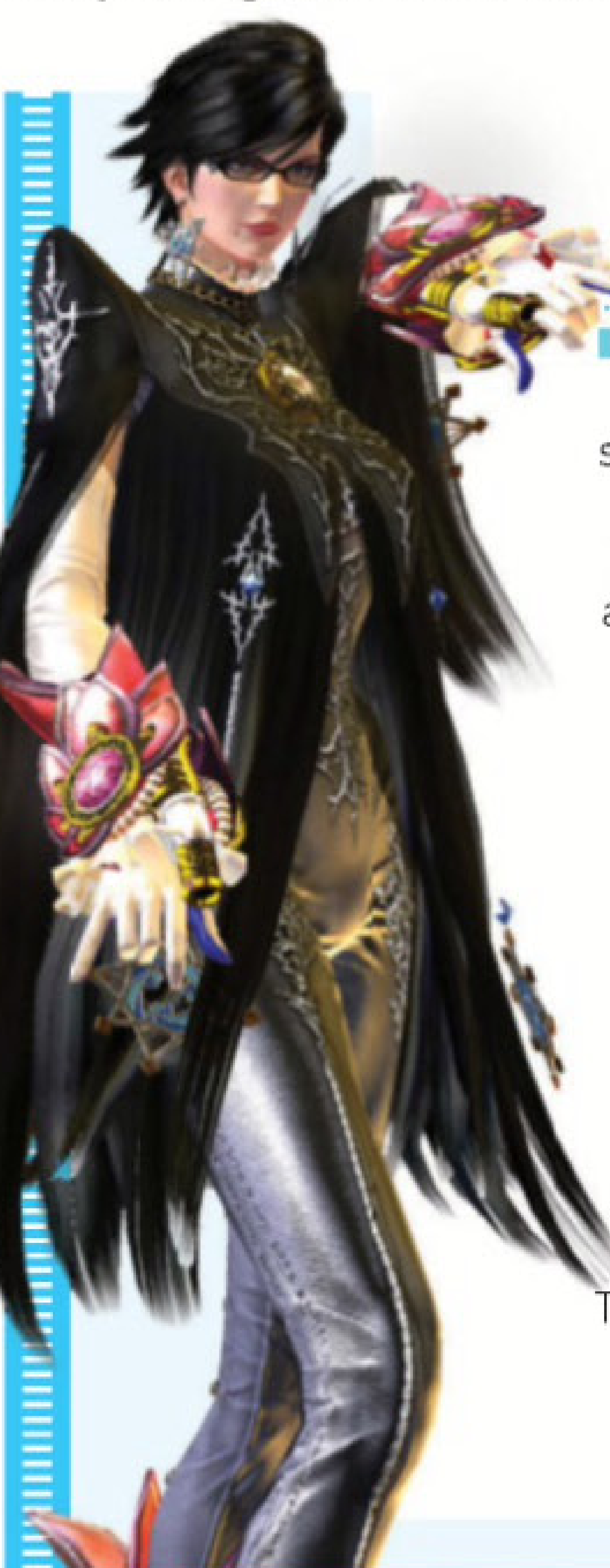
Of all the games to release in late 2014, this was the one that surprised us the most and it was probably helped considerably by *Assassin's Creed* turning into a bit of a disaster. Monolith mastered the action genre with a single swipe of its great sword, and the Nemesis system is going to be around for a while.



VELOCITY 2X

Format: **PS4** Release: **2 September 2014**
Developer: **FuturLab**

Mixing together a great action platformer with a frenetic shoot-'em-up and giving each some of the best elements of the other (speed, bullet-dodging, precision, world traversal), *Velocity 2X* is one of the most insanely fun games of the generation so far. It's simple and no nonsense – we love it for that.



BAYONETTA 2

Format: **Wii U** Release: **24 October 2014** Developer: **Platinum Games**

There was nothing broken about Platinum's *Bayonetta* formula and so it didn't need to fix it. *Bayonetta 2* delivers the same best-in-class hardcore action as its predecessor and proved simultaneously that the Wii U can deliver crowd-pleasing action outside of its first-party exclusive roster. As you chain your moves and combos together into more and more insane attacks, *Bayonetta 2* taps into all the greatest moments that titles like this have been delivering for the last few years. While it still channels the core gameplay of *Devil May Cry*, this is an even more uplifting and engaging experience. There's more polish, more flair and, dare we say it, even more fun than Dante managed, which was a lot. A great reason to own a Wii U.

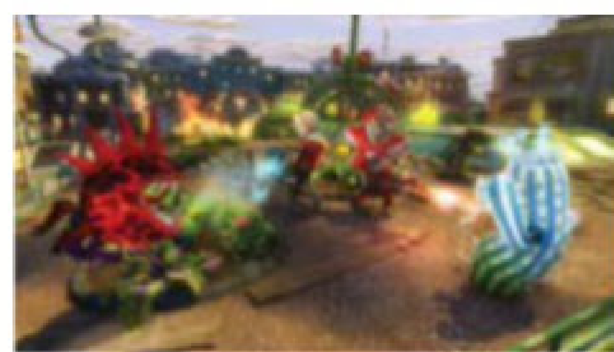




TITANFALL

Format: **Xbox One**
Release: **11 March 2014**
Developer: **Respawn Entertainment**

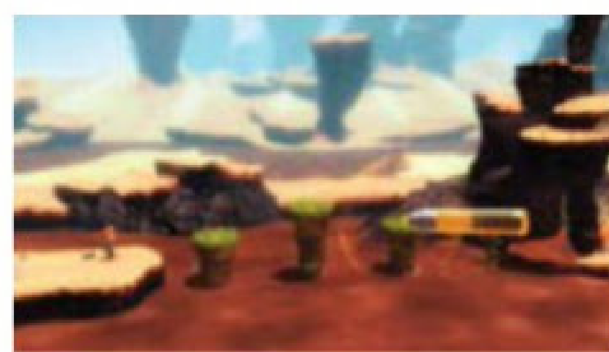
Probably the first really meaningful exclusive of the generation, Xbox One got a pretty superb and highly focused multiplayer shooter from Respawn. It doesn't have masses of depth, but the core gameplay is perfectly refined.



PLANTS VS ZOMBIES: GARDEN WARFARE

Format: **Multi**
Release: **28 February 2014**
Developer: **PopCap Games**

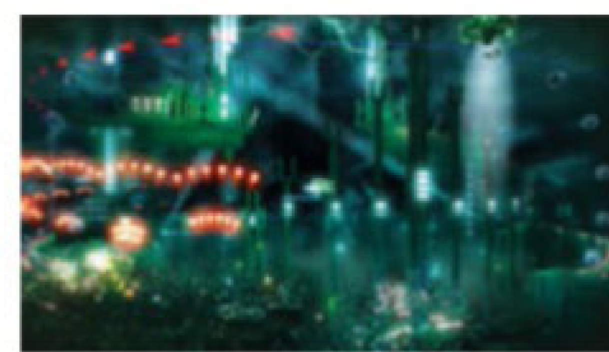
We were shocked with how much we enjoyed this game. It had absolutely no right to be as good or as enjoyable as it was, but it reminded us a lot of the *Mass Effect* multiplayer and gave us a very pure and anarchic third-person shooter game.



MAX: THE CURSE OF BROTHERHOOD

Format: **Xbox One**
Release: **20 December 2013**
Developer: **Press Play**

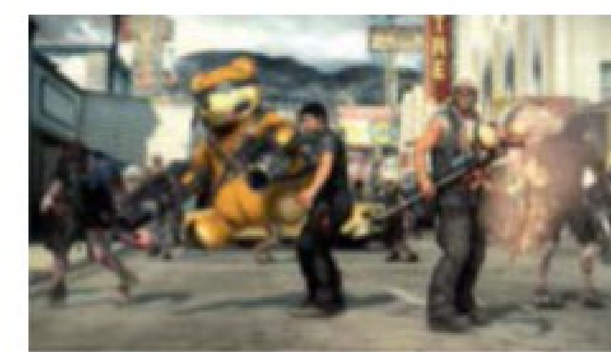
As a revamp of *Max & The Magic Marker*, Xbox One got a pretty excellent platformer from Press Play with this one and the marker mechanic, while it slowed things down a little, was interesting enough to keep things moving.



RESOGUN

Format: **PS4**
Release: **29 November 2013**
Developer: **Housemarque**

Simply the best shoot-'em-up of the generation so far, the bullet hell of *Resogun* is a hardcore gamer's dream. We'll see no shortage of imitators in the coming months, we're sure, but the fact it keeps getting updates suggests there's plenty of life in this game.



DEAD RISING 3

Format: **Xbox One**
Release: **22 November 2013**
Developer: **Capcom Vancouver**

Teetering somewhere between genius and madness, *Dead Rising*'s exclusive release on Xbox One has its pitfalls, but the core madness of the crafting system and costumes makes it a very fun game to dip into. Don't expect any depth, just lots of zombie-slaying.



ALIEN ISOLATION

Format: Multi Release: 7 October 2014 Developer: The Creative Assembly

Simply put, this is the best horror game currently available this generation. The fact that's it's also the best *Alien* franchise title we've ever played is a bonus. If you care at all about the *Alien* franchise then getting to play The Creative Assembly's homage to the 1979 film was a transcendent moment for you. The simplification of the *Alien* formula down to lone survivor in an inhospitable environment was brilliantly executed. As you duck and dodge your way around the Sevastopol space station, the glorious tension of the film is made interactive and even more heart-poundingly intense. We still have trouble understanding why someone didn't attempt this idea years ago, but we're pleased it was delivered now and with such fine visuals.



SHOVEL KNIGHT

Format: Multi
Release: 5 November 2014
Developer: Yacht Club Games

So far this generation a lot of indie games have been about nostalgia and that's certainly true of *Shovel Knight*, which draws on the best history of action adventure gaming from the NES era and brings it back to life. Its fantastic levels, combat and bosses make it a really engrossing platformer to get into.



SUPER TIME FORCE

Format: Multi
Release: 14 May 2014
Developer: Capybara Games

Capybara just knows how to make hits. Game after game, it gives us solid mechanics, a fun little twist, and plenty of personality. *Super Time Force* has all these in spades. The time reversal and character adding mechanic can turn stages into a mess of bullets and action, but it's also a great puzzle mechanic to master.



MARIO KART 8

Format: Wii U
Release: 30 May 2014
Developer: Nintendo EAD Group No. 1

One of the best in a series that's rarely been anything less than superb, *Mario Kart 8* is as great a multiplayer experience with friends as it's ever been. The recent addition of 200cc class as DLC is taking things up a notch with some insane speeds on the track now too.



THE LEGEND OF ZELDA: THE WIND WAKER HD

Format: Wii U
Release: 4 October 2014
Developer: Nintendo EAD Group No. 3

We felt that *The Wind Waker* was one of the best *Zelda* titles ever made, maligned by some for its 'childish' art style and for being on the unpopular GameCube, but time has proven us right on this one.

FORZA MOTORSPORT 5

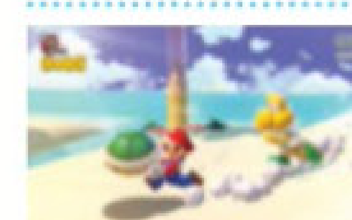
Format: Xbox One
Release: 22 November 2013
Developer: Turn 10 Studios



While everyone else seemed to stutter with Xbox One frame-rates and resolutions, Turn 10 just got the job done. The market system for cars and sharing liveries is a little ropey, but the track experience is rock solid. It's the best sim of the generation so far.

SUPER MARIO 3D WORLD

Format: Wii U
Release: 29 November 2013
Developer: Nintendo EAD Tokyo



Mario always seems to give us the goods and this 3D spin on the classic platformer is no different. Building on the original handheld game, *3D World* has all the fan service and platforming challenge you could want from the little plumber.

NEED FOR SPEED: RIVALS

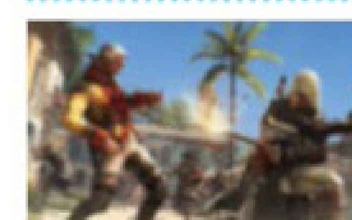
Format: Multi
Release: 29 November 2013
Developer: Ghost Games



It feels like a long time since we played *Need For Speed*, but we dipped back in recently, and the Autolog and AllDrive systems make it tough to step away. It's just really good at delivering fun action racing in small bursts that keep you wanting more.

ASSASSIN'S CREED IV: BLACK FLAG

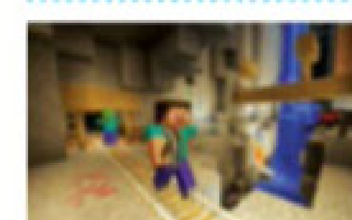
Format: Multi
Release: 22 November 2013
Developer: Ubisoft Montreal



What can we say? We loved playing as a pirate and given that *Unity* let us down, going back to *Black Flag* and indulging in the shenanigans of the high seas is incredibly appealing. The added atmospheric effects on Xbox One and PS4 add a lot to the game too.

MINECRAFT

Format: Multi
Release: 4 September 2014
Developer: 4J Studios



Really, we consider *Minecraft* to be essential on pretty much every platform and every generation, but playing it on PS4 and Xbox One with its massively improved world size and draw distance really helps immerse you in this explorers paradise.



Fail, Improve, Repeat

How the new Unreal Tournament is finding success through its failures



Times have changed. That may well be something you've heard a lot of over the last couple of years, but the industry has undergone a dramatic change in an incredibly short space of time. To think, only a decade ago you were likely still saving files on memory cards, using controllers with wires and only ever bought games that came in a box. And yet in an even shorter space of time we've witnessed a radical shift – not only in how games are played, but how they are *developed* too. After the rise and fall of Kickstarter, it became clear gamers were keen to have their say, for each individual to get involved with the games that personally got them excited. If you happen across crowdfunding websites now you'll still regularly hear talk of developers keen to get 'feedback from the community', and this approach of involving the dedicated fanbase has become so pervasive to game development that it's had a knock-on effect for big name developers, too. EA delayed the release of *Battlefield: Hardline* after responses from players of its beta, Ubisoft's *The Division* is getting a PC release courtesy of the insistent voices of the internet, and let's not forget the countless patches, updates and DLC all driven by the complaints, demands and responses of fans playing these games. Even Square Enix with *Final Fantasy XV* – a franchise it is normally quite sheltered about – saw its developers break the marketing silence to insist they are listening to fans and are making changes to suit. The company even recently put out a survey to get the opinions of those who had played the *Episode Duscae* demo bundled in with *Final Fantasy Type-O*; a very atypical action of the Japanese developer. Things have changed, and while Kickstarter's relevance might have dwindled, its resultant effects haven't: the rise of the indie developer, the concept of alphafunding and even the »

Taking Flak

An anatomy of the first official Flak Cannon made by modder KazeoHin



Characteristic design

■ The official Flak Cannon also comes with its own official ammunition, the smiling face of the Flak Grenade. It's an iconic image, sure, but not always a part of the weapon's design; with the backing of the community it was decided the addition of the smiling Flak face would be added onto the ammo.

Subtle details

■ There's also a handy little counter applied to the top of the machine that lets you know how many Flak Grenades you have left. It's superfluous, of course, since the game's UI tells you such info, but it's the subtle details that really make a design shine and such an addition goes a long way to making it feel realistic.

Game consistency

■ Liandri Mining Corporation still plays a significant role in *Unreal Tournament*, as it always has and it should be no different here. This huge company, in the game's canon, formed and popularised the tournament, and so it only makes sense that the weapons it employed should be branded as such.

Appearance of functionality

■ Since the Flak Cannon is essentially retrofit industry-grade mining equipment, it needs to have such look about it. The design of the new Flak Cannon stood out from the many others on the forums thanks to this attention to detail, with additions such as gas piping and hydraulic tubes to really give it that mining-tool look.

Hard-worn chassis

■ Though the new Flak Cannon was designed with various skins of varying cleaniness, the official release of the model comes battered and worn. Since this is the heavy-duty shotgun of *Unreal Tournament*, it needs to be blasted by dirt and ash to represent the hard-wearing of the weapon.

There's still only one map that is properly developed. The rest are basic modelled-out arenas for testing.



importance the feedback from the community can have on altering the direction of development. No longer are games built behind a shroud; it's all there for the world to see, and more than ever the world is interested in watching.

Unreal Tournament – the numberless new entry in the franchise from Epic Games – is enduring such a burden. With an up-and-running version of the game ready to play for anyone willing to try it in alpha, *Unreal Tournament*'s community has been offering advice and suggestions for months now, affecting its flow of combat, the design of the maps and even the weapons themselves. The developer took things a little further than asking for opinions, however; its fans can get involved with its development, too. Additionally the game comes with a marketplace, a Steam Workshop-style system where modders can upload their own creations – be it mods, Mutators, maps or modes – and even sell them for cash. Everything about this new UT is driven by the fans that love the series. "Epic Games has been embracing open development and transparency since the launch of UDK a few years ago," states Stacey Conley, community manager on *Unreal Tournament*. "Releasing *Unreal Tournament* as a free game to be developed with the community seemed to be the next logical step." Conley adds that, "There was definitely a lot of adapting to do," for the team when it came to changing to this all-new method of development. Now its fans were also developers, and that provided a whole new logistical problem – now Epic needed to share its game's assets and code with more than just the internal development team. "We had to figure out how we would share files with the community," says Conley, "and how we would choose what content would make it into the game. GitHub [a collaborative code sharing tool] has played a huge part in our process and they have been super-helpful. We've been posting every change to *Unreal Tournament*'s code there and there are iterations in the forums. It's been quite humbling. We're actually still figuring it all out and it has been a great learning experience."





Unreal Tournament has long been a franchise for advertising the latest Unreal Engine's capabilities – in this case, outstanding lighting.

"Epic Games is airing all of its laundry so to speak, dirty and clean"

Overcoming such obstacles was always going to be tough, but for Epic it's managed the shift with a great acumen. The *UT* team is smaller than most would be for such titles, focusing the project more and enabling a flexibility that is necessary when it involves such a baying group of devoted fans-cum-developers. And what is especially interesting is who this team is formed of, and how that led to the inspiration of the development. "I think for all of us it was the memory of spending hours creating content for past versions of the game. Nearly every single one of us [on the team] got our start in the *Unreal Tournament* modding community. It's inspirational for us to see the collaboration going on between community members and seeing modding teams form and start contributing." It only makes sense that Epic would want to enable the modding community when its own in-house team is formed from those whose development heritage began with *Unreal Tournament* and the mods they created. Moreover, the smaller team isn't alone in its task, it has the assistance of



to watch the ordeal unveil itself organically, is a very refreshing sight. This does, of course, mean every facet of the game's development is available to see – Epic Games is airing all of its laundry so to speak, dirty *and* clean. All game development – from the smallest indie titles to the biggest blockbusters – includes the earliest stages that often suffer setbacks and failures. It's how the core elements of any game are designed and finely honed – all in secrecy, often before the game is even announced. Here, with *Unreal Tournament*, that is not a possibility; failures are inevitable, and Epic is aware of that. "The developers know they aren't always right. There are a lot of things we don't even agree on between ourselves and we usually will find our answers in the community. Data is a huge help as well. Players will say something like, 'people don't use the Flak Cannon because it isn't powerful enough', but the data will show it's the most popular weapon in the game. Sometimes having the data



"The developers know they aren't always right. There are a lot of things we don't even agree on between ourselves"







modders and fans creating content and helping to improve the game. "We're a small team and have a small QA/playtest team to support us. The community has found bugs and gameplay issues long before we could have. Having people who have played and modded previous *Unreal Tournament* games has been a huge help for us. More importantly, they have shared so much with us and the community. The content is coming in and there is no way we'd be as far in the development process without their help."

Since the community is so involved with *UT* it requires a transparency not common with the videogames industry. At a time when the marketing departments control a lot of what gamers have access to in the run up to development – at least when it comes to typical big-budget development – it's unusual to see such openness. Ordinarily we're treated to teasers, E3 reveals and arbitrary media drops and detail announcements; to have none of that, is all you need to make an informed decision."

The team has to be comfortable releasing all sorts of updates and changes knowing it may well be wrong, knowing that it might not be what players want. Where typically such decisions were moulded by months of internal playtests – those failures being siphoned out gradually – now it can be crowdsourced. It means players will experience elements they believe to be wrong or that need fixing, even things that the *UT* team were adamant they were better for the game in the first place. But it also means the end result is something that the fans will enjoy – they helped find that perfect balance, after all. This poses another question, however: at what point do the developers enforce their own design decisions over what its community believes? "Everyone has their favourite version of *Unreal Tournament*," says Conley, "and would like features from their favourite in the new game. Unfortunately we can't include everything and »





There are only two playable character models at the moment – humans and the returning Necris faction.

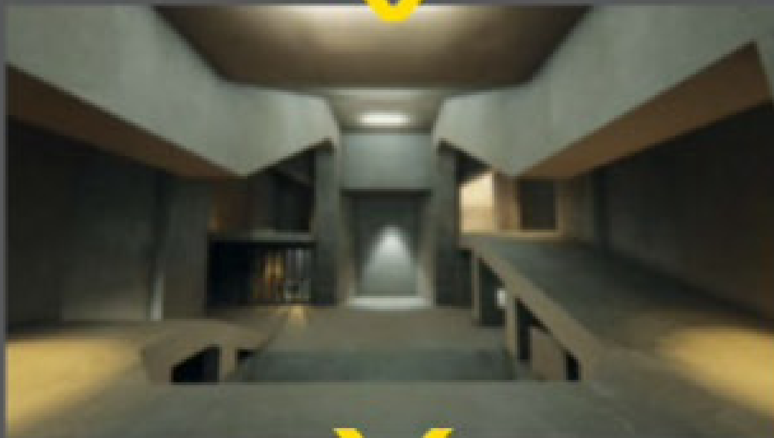
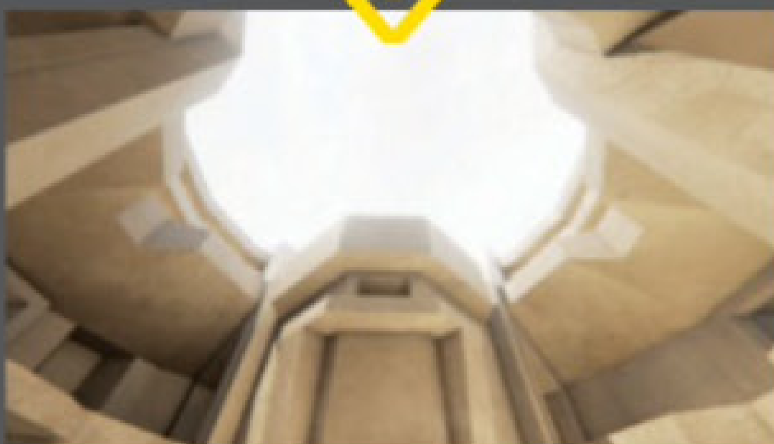




DM _ Overlord concepts an interesting idea that allows one person to become Overlord, gaining access to locked stores with UDamage and other power-ups.

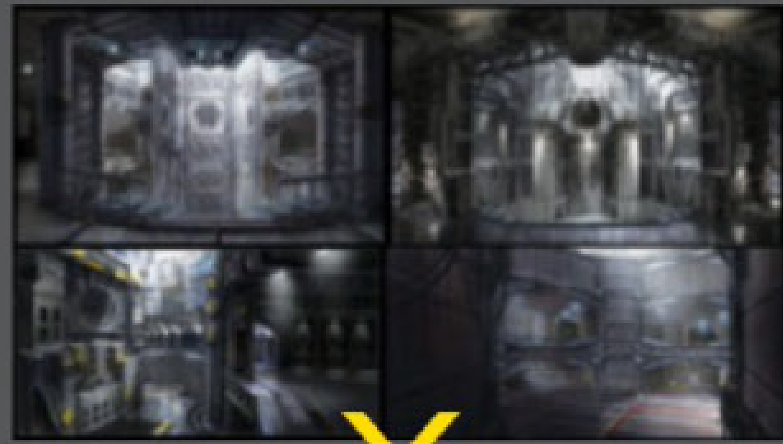
Building An Outpost

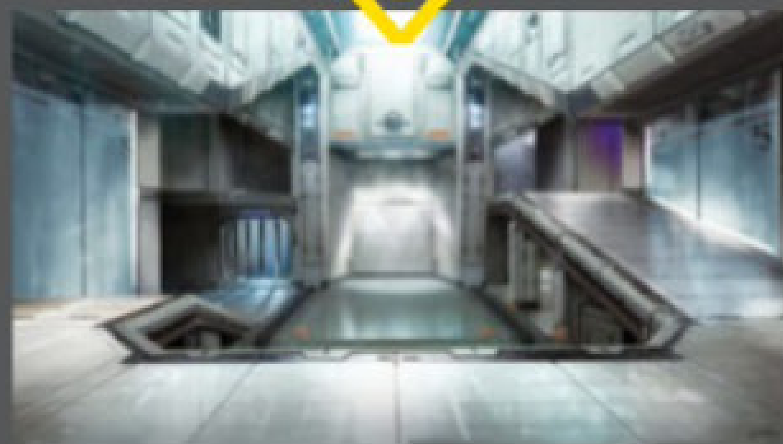
How Unreal Tournament's first officially complete map – Outpost 23 – evolved from concept to final release

STEP 1

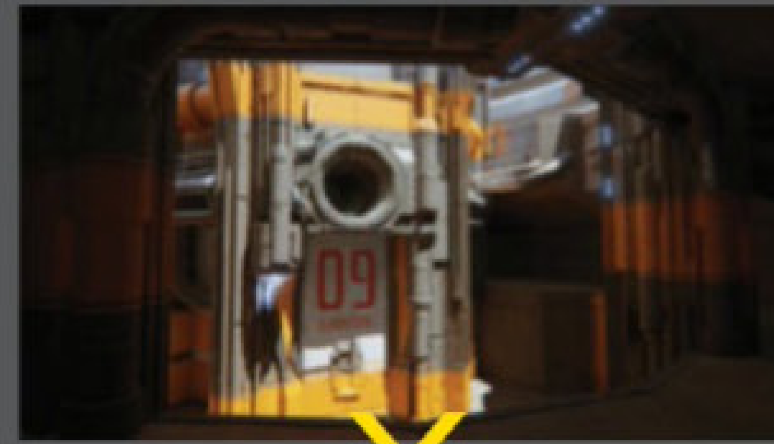
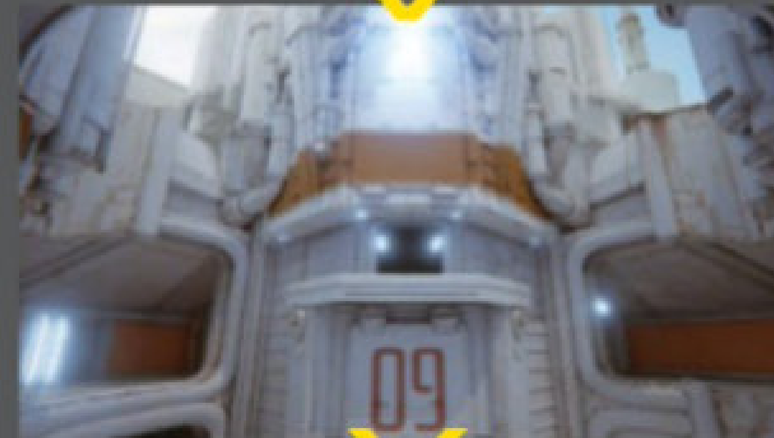
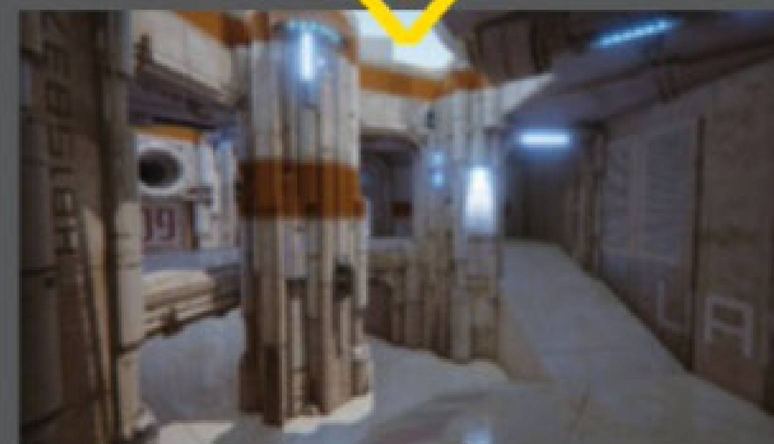
Initially the level was titled 'DM_ Circuit', in reference to the obvious route running through and around the level. It was modelled out in a very basic form to get the mechanical details of the level feeling right, a necessary method to map design to fine-tune its playability before all the detail is added in.





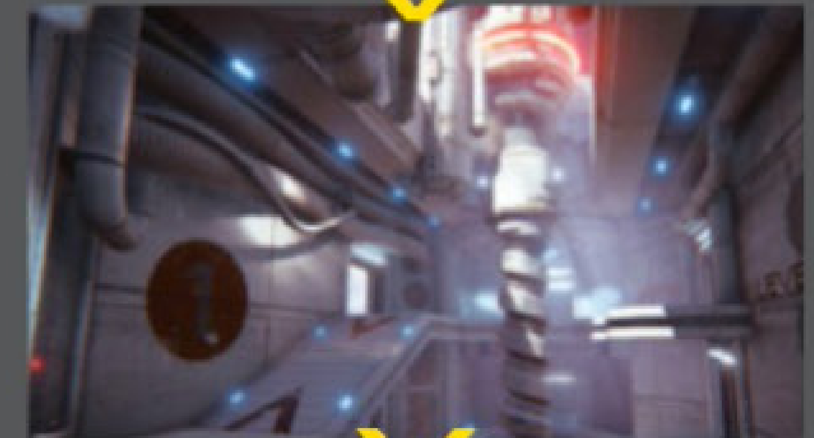
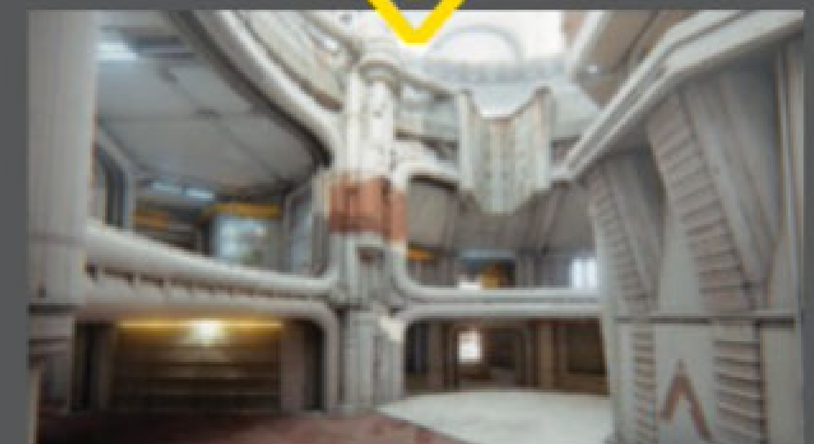
STEP 2

Concept art was created to decide on the feel of the map. The team settled on a sci-fi setting for this level, one of the three core designs of the *Unreal Tournament* universe – the others being industrial and ruined castles. Concept art was created by in-house devs, external contractors and *UT* forum members.

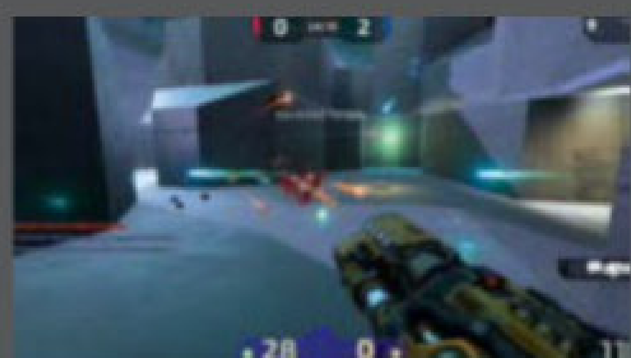
STEP 3

At this point art director Chris Perna began creating a 'working concept', taking the concept art he liked and implementing it into very small sections of meshes within the level to better hone the ultimate look of the level. It would allow for a vertical slice of the map to play around with.

STEP 4

The last stage before the level is complete is adding in meshes and details to grow it into the map it needs to be. It involves a lot of iterative work, with many design elements changing. Such changes include swapping a drill for something more high-tech, or lighting in certain areas to make it easier to play in.



The primary fire of the Flak Cannon has been tweaked periodically, now offering a slower fire rate to maintain a need for close-range precision.

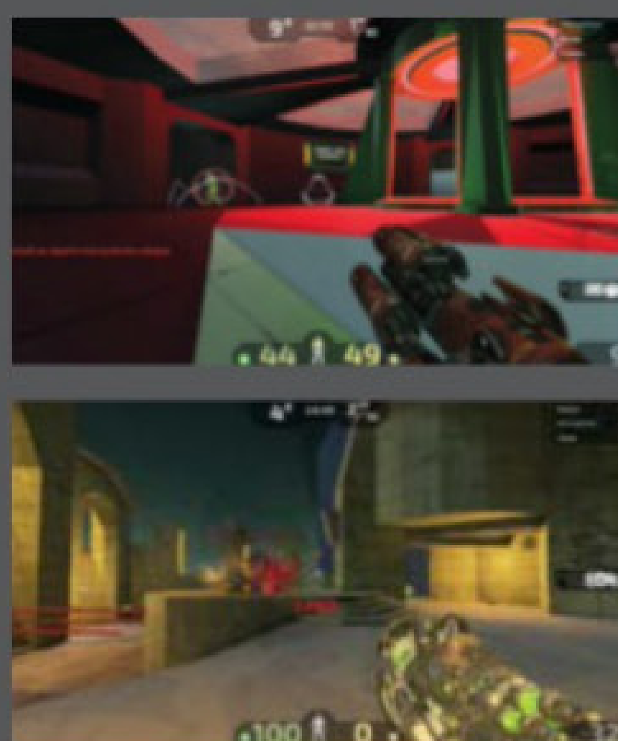
» we've had some challenges getting the movement right and trying to make a great experience for everyone. We also want to make sure that there is enough new and exciting content to attract newer players. It's been challenging trying to find a good balance." Even core mechanics – such as movement and combat – needs that feedback to flourish, to become what both the developers and the fans enjoy. "We're pretty close to where we think it feels right," adds Conley on the matter of *UT*'s mechanics, "but there are always things that could be changed. The community has been incredibly helpful in the process and they have even contributed code changes that have stuck with the game."

As previously mentioned, all of *Unreal Tournament*'s code is available to anyone interested in helping, and though any changes made by the community won't immediately make it into the game – for obvious reasons – it can be enlightening to see how such impact can alter the way the game is played. All the same, the team ensures it maintains control over the project, and that particular design elements are not altered. Of particular note is the removal of the double jump, a feature from *Unreal Tournament 2004* that many fans have been clamouring for. This new *UT* instead focuses on acrobatics, allowing for familiar concepts, such as side hops, but adding in abilities like wall jumps. It creates a very particular playstyle – one that rewards skill in movement as much as aiming – even though it may leave some fans feeling left out. "I am actually a big fan of the double jump in *UT2004*," Conley tells us, "and at first I was sad we weren't going to include it. After playing though, you start to see that the double jump just doesn't fit in this game because of the size of the maps. There are many other moves that can get you quickly from one place to another." And let's not forget, anyone can create a double-jump Mutator (in-game mods that can be applied to particular servers or games). They could even craft a quintuple jump, if they wanted; such is the freedom of development here. Such division among the fans ultimately leads to the game's improvement, even if not everyone in the community is satisfied. "It has been challenging," adds Conley. "Gamers are a passionate bunch and as I mentioned before, everyone has their favourite version of *Unreal Tournament*. There have been some heated discussions in the forums about which game is best and what people would like to see in the new UT. Our guys try to jump in the forums as much as they can, but it can be a rough crowd at times. In the end though, we are all working toward the same goal. And we manage to have some valuable discussion and critiques."



It's that passion that emboldens the new *Unreal*

Tournament, however. Whether it's development of official game assets or cosmetic skins, maps and mods released onto the *UT* Marketplace, there's a bevy of ways that fans are contributing to the new title. More than that, however, because of their passion they're putting countless hours of their own time into ensuring it is the best it can be, as Conley states: "The level of quality coming from the community contributors [is impressive]. It's amazing to see triple-A quality concept art posted on the forums. We've even hired one of the community concept artists as a contractor. His work is amazing. We also have a community 3D modeller who wound up making the new Flak Cannon. People are crazy about the design and it is in the game right now." That last point is especially poignant; the Flak Cannon is perhaps *Unreal Tournament*'s most iconic weapon, and yet its latest iteration for the series wasn't even created by the development team. The 3D modeller – known by his UT forum name of KazeoHin – took full control of the process, without any acknowledgement from Epic that it would be included in the game. He created concept art, refined its style and built a high-polygon model, all the while posting his progress on the forums. The community returned the effort, rewarding him with feedback on changes that ultimately refined it into a design that all involved were pleased with. So impressed was everyone with the model's design that it was incorporated into the game itself, officially adopted by the development team who went about adapting it into an in-game model, rigging it and animating it for its inclusion in the current (and, inevitably, the final) build – all entirely driven by fans of the series.



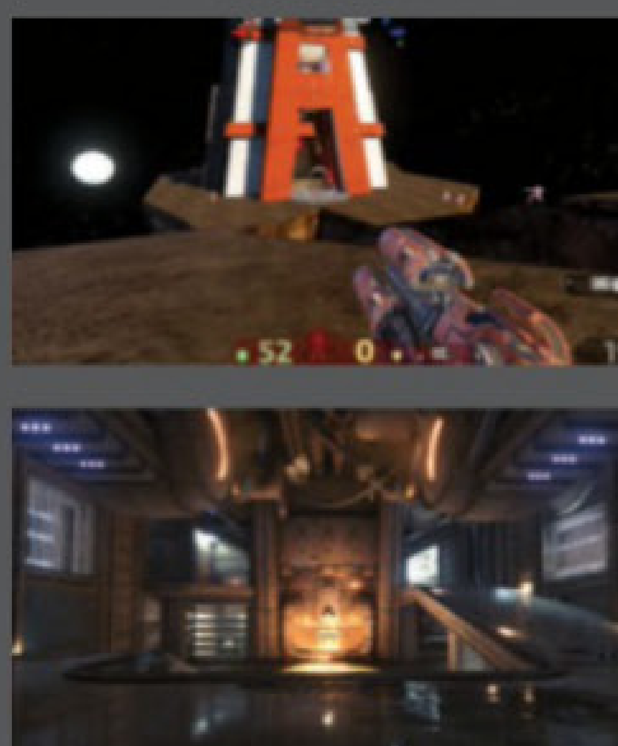
There was a worry that Epic would tone down the blood and gore for this next iteration but don't worry, gibs will fly.

"I'M NOT SURE ANY OF US WOULD LIKE TO DEVELOP IN ANY OTHER WAY AFTER THIS AMAZING EXPERIENCE"

It's still early days for this new *Unreal Tournament* too, the game is currently in alpha with the core toolset ready to play with only a handful of complete – or near-complete – weapons, maps and character models. There's due to be so much more failure from Epic over the course of the game's development, but with the backing and persistent involvement of its fans there isn't much danger of these missteps making it into the game by the end of its development. If there is, in fact, an end. "Even though the Marketplace is just coming online in a pre-alpha state, we're happy to see quite a few people using it to get new Cosmetic Items and maps," claims Conley. "The best part is that the items in the Marketplace are created by the community. As a result, users are learning our tools and sharing content with others, which meshes with our goal to offer features that provide real value to our players." This Marketplace will only continue to grow, a self-sufficient world of additional content crafted entirely by the fans of the game. It takes user-generated content to a whole new level, eclipsing the possibilities of even the likes of *Team Fortress 2*. It's early days, of course, so there is much work to be done: "While we've had some great content contributed," adds Conley, "there is still a lot to be done in all aspects of development. We need people who can do UI work, voice packs, programming, characters, cosmetic items and more. We'd also like to see more people contribute items to the Marketplace." In spite of that, there are already some exciting creations being release. Conley points to two mods in particular: Chaos, and Speed. The latter is a new game mode similar to the 'Bunny Tracks' levels created for previous *Unreal Tournament* games, a solo race involving tricky athletics and deft control. It's an interesting spin on the core gameplay that is already there, utilising the fantastic acrobatic movement of this new *UT* for platforming stages, replete with their own leader boards. Meanwhile long-time fans of the franchise may already know the name 'Chaos', a complete overhaul mod that adds in swords, unique guns and a selection of other exciting twists on the *UT* gameplay. It's been a staple of the franchise for years – and was even included on the disc of the *Game Of The Year* edition for the very first *Unreal Tournament* – and now a modding team has formed to make ChaosUT4 happen.

This is a platform for Epic Games; *Unreal Tournament* will only continue to grow from here, and perhaps even expand onto consoles one day. "People are contributing more and more to their favourite games," says Conley, acknowledging the growing trend of community-driven development, "And these contributions are extending the life of games to years after their release. With innovations like the Steam Box on the horizon, it only makes sense that consoles will be the next step in user-generated content." And on PS3, *Unreal Tournament 3* even allowed for players to copy over user-created maps with USB sticks – proving that Epic has long been keen on empowering its passionate fanbase, wherever they are. "We've been enjoying the collaboration with the community," says Conley of the latest *UT*, "And we love how easy community ideas and contributions are to be implemented thanks to Unreal Engine and GitHub. I'm not sure any of us would like to develop in any other way after this amazing experience," adds Conley, suggesting there could one day be a shift to this form of development for the company as a whole. For now, however, *Unreal Tournament* still has a lot of failure to go.





Outpost 23 is a good example of a typically Unreal level, though it's as at home in an industrial setting as a destroyed castle.



The return of the Chaos mod isn't a surprise, but it's got fans excited. It's always been a popular mod.



Can the APPLE WATCH be a gaming device?

We haven't played wrist-mounted games since the days when we were wearing digital watches and velcro trainers. They were pretty simple devices, fiddly and inconvenient, but we can't deny there was something a little magical about them. Being able to carry a game around with you on such a discreet device without anyone being the wiser (as far as you were concerned) had a certain thrill to it. A thrill perhaps usurped in modern times by the existence of the smartphone, a device that can carry tens of games around in your pocket, played by four-year-olds to 84-year-olds the world over. The smartphone, and at its spearhead the iPhone, has made us all gamers, but what might Apple's Watch add to gaming culture?

At first the answer might appear to be not much. It's a relatively small device, even if you spend the extra money to buy the 42mm version, and with 18 hours of battery life on the Sport model, it's not built for extended gaming, but that doesn't mean that developers have been scared away from taking a swing at it. There are a plethora of intrepid gaming pioneers looking to be the first to crack the Apple Watch gaming formula. But after years of making iOS games, how do you even go about designing a game to play on a watch?

"At first, we just blue-skied it," says Stephen Griffin, founder and CEO of Eyes Wide Games, releasing *Watch This Homerun* on Apple Watch. "Everyone on the team had a preconceived notion of what we would be able to do with the device. We knew it was going to have a small screen so we settled on doing a one-button/one-tap game early on." The result was a relatively basic baseball game experience. Small, simple and fast. A theme that was clearly going to develop as we looked deeper into gaming on the Apple Watch.

"Obviously the first thing we had to do, as with any device, is ask how do we make games for this, what's the way to approach this?" asks Vince Farquharson, COO of Bossa Studio, maker of *Spy_Watch* and perhaps more famously *Surgeon Simulator* and *I Am Bread*. Bossa went about its process in quite a methodical, ground-up fashion. "What we did first was think about how people would use the Watch as opposed to phones. That's the closest analogy and before you've thought about it too much and you imagine it in your head, it's about a phone game on a watch. That's the path of least resistance. But that's not actually the way to do it."

> "Once we realised the way you use a watch is completely different to the way you use a phone, then we decided: we know nothing"
>
> **Vince Farquharson, COO of Bossa Studio**

Certainly, the idea of even trying to play *Angry Birds* on an Apple Watch seems fiddly and daunting. The real estate of the screen simply doesn't allow for that kind of interaction and, as Eyes Wide Games found out, the development kits don't make things very easy either. "After starting to really play with the developer kit, it became clear that certain things were not going to be possible and most importantly the games were going to have to be composed differently," Griffin admits. "We then switched to a 'Hey, can this be built using the available Dev Kit?' mindset. We built around seven or eight experiments and iterated on those to try and discover roadblocks and work arounds… We quickly learned that it wasn't going to be normal game development where it's more like an open canvas bound by your programming ability and imagination. The Dev Kit doesn't really lend itself to game development." »





The Apple Watch doesn't seem like an obvious gaming device because of its small screen and limited battery power, but some interesting and innovative games are already available for it.





Bossa Studios, maker of *Spy_Watch*, held several game jams internally prototyping all sorts of game ideas before settling on this role-playing experience.

For Bossa it was important to bring with it some of the lessons of what it was like developing for the iPhone back in the day and seeing that it's not always the direct route that delivers the really eye-catching game ideas. "If you look at phones, for example, the way you play games on phones has kind of mapped itself to the way you do other things on that phone," says Farquharson. "Basically what you do with phones is that every hour or two you're going to interact with it for a few minutes. That's how you play games and it's also how you do email and Facebook and everything else; it all kind of aligns itself with logical reasons."

This is the thought process that's driven their design for *Spy_Watch*: "You look at the Watch and [think] 'How do people use these watches or watches in general?' It's something you probably look at once every 15-20 minutes for a few seconds. So what's the right sort of game that maps itself to that usage behaviour every 15-20 minutes for a few seconds? And it doesn't take long to realise that there's nothing. There isn't actually anything like that, which is an interesting dilemma. You've got to think about not only making a game, but making a new type of game that can marry itself to a device that has a very different usage case. At that point we had to go to square one, we had to look at the device, look at the way that Apple was talking about it, look at where they've put their time and effort and what they've really made that device to do."

And that's led rather interestingly to a spy game that plays out entirely in text via notifications. "Imagine the old style text adventure, but put into a modern app with spies," adds Farquharson. "We described it the other day as WhatsApp meets James Bond, which is a pretty good way of describing it as well."

But for both studios it has been an entirely new learning experience. While smartphones may have stumbled through a period of awfully-mapped virtual joysticks and inappropriately shoehorned-in first-person shooters, despite taking a little time to find their feet they did manage to find some classic genres to rest upon like point-and-click adventures and tower defence games. The processing power and architecture of those devices was robust and versatile. The Apple Watch appears to be a different egg to crack.

> "It's only a matter of time before you have the next rogue sensation"
> **Stephen Griffin, founder and CEO of Eyes Wide Games**

"In the end, we figured out how to build some sport games and a few other action scenarios using what I would normally consider to be hacks or tricks," admits Griffin. "However, sometimes that's the only option you have. I guess games have always pressed the limits of their platforms and had to resort to tricks to make them play." Where Bossa ended up in the early stages with the Apple Watch was just admitting it didn't know what to do.

"Once we realised the way you use a watch is completely different to the way you use a phone, then we decided: we know nothing," says Farquharson, refreshingly honest. "We've got a small screen, but what's it really good at? It's good at really crisp, nice iconographic style visuals. Notifications are really good. And we sort of did it like that, working out what it was good at. Then you had these puzzle pieces of notifications, being able to glance at it [in a way] that feels quite gadgety, it looks quite beautiful."

"We anticipate that it won't always be this way, but you do what you have to do to get a game ready for the launch of a new platform," adds Griffin. "You can't sit around and wait for the developer tools to be fun and fluid for building games." And so we're in a melting pot phase where ideas are being experimented with. There are going to be some games that



It's going to be interesting to see how developers try to make use of other Watch features like its heart rate-monitoring tech to get more from the device.

try to do too much and many that will do too little. At the moment we're seeing a lot of second-screen apps for games, offering quick access to loadouts or tactics. It all rather begs the question, given a little time, what might the Apple Watch be really good at?

"It's definitely the fact that it's so readily available to the wearer. All they have to do is lift up their arm and play," insists Griffin. "Because much of the startup friction is removed on the Apple Watch both technically and via design guidelines, you can now make games that only take 15 seconds to play but still link up with previous play sessions to form 5, 10, 15 minute experiences. We think it's going to lead to more play and enable the creation of completely new types of games."

But it still isn't really a device meant for gaming. Its battery life and development kit speak to that. Bossa tested a lot of ideas trying to find formulas that would work to the devices strengths and not embellish its weaknesses. "We knew the specs and the battery considerations, and because of the way Apple designed it, the kind of interactions they imagined won't drain the battery, but the path of least resistance for game developers probably would be a path that would drain the battery," reveals Farquharson. "We were very mindful of that. If you stick to the way Apple wants you to interact with it, you don't hit the problem. If you try and go off piste with it you're going to start hitting these issues." So with several internal game jams to help foster new ideas the studio tested and tested and tested, finally combining a few of the ideas that emerged into this notification-based experience.



Bossa's Rob Mackenzie worked on *Splinter Cell: Blacklist* and *Far Cry 4* before this project.



Bossa COO Vince Farquharson is passionate about what the Apple Watch can achieve in the future.

What's particularly interesting about this direction for Bossa in particular is that it's a studio that's become well known and loved for its irreverent humour and light, physics-based gaming experiences with plenty of challenge and depth beyond the surface hilarity. With *Spy_Watch*, on this tiny device, story has become the most important thing. "You drill down to what the device does best, which is messaging and conversations, and that leads you to story," explains Farquharson. "If you don't care about the story and you don't care about the characters, then you don't care about the game. We had to double down and invest in that."

That said, it's a device about intimacy and discretion. Two concepts beneficial to a new piece of technology, but not really compatible with the modern gaming obsession with sharing, upload and interacting with others. "It does very smart things like it knows when you're looking at it and it turns itself on and it knows when you're not looking at it and it turns itself off," explains Farquharson. "It's simple things like this that are built into the DNA of the product that are not really about sharing the device."

But, adds Farquharson colleague Rob Mackenzie, a designer at Bossa Studios, it could encourage a different kind of real-world interaction instead, more in line with story-driven experiences. "We do have procedural stories, so no two people will have exactly the same game. They will have had slightly different missions in traversing the main story, so if there is going to be any shareability it's going to be the water- »

Gaming Potential

What does the Apple Watch have that gamers might enjoy the benefit of in the future?

Force Touch
An added feature is that the Apple Watch is pressure sensitive to your touch. Press down hard on the screen and it can act like a right click on the mouse.

All In S1
The S1 chip inside the Apple Watch is an all in one computer. It houses the memory, storage and support processors. Bottom line: it's pretty powerful for a small chip.

Secret Gaming
The discreet nature of the Apple Watch means that you can play games without anyone ever really knowing. Games that rely on text are particularly suitable.



Multi-Touch
As with any touch device Apple produces you can pinch and zoom your way around this device, so game maps shouldn't be any trouble to navigate.

Memory
At 8GB, the Apple Watch doesn't exactly feature a mass of storage space, but for small games, particularly if they are largely communicating with your phone, it should work pretty well.

Biometrics
Thanks to the in-built heart rate sensor the Watch can track your activity. Not a bad place to start for fitness games or games tied to horror experiences.

Scrolling Help
The crown on the side of the Apple Watch isn't for winding it; it can be used to scroll the screen, meaning you don't need to cover it with your finger to read in-game text.

Game & Watch

What games are already making the move to your wrist?



Spy_Watch

Role-playing through text messages and fast responses, this is a fun mix of augmented reality and *Football Manager*, only with a spy on the other end of the line. It's a pretty smart way of working around the limitations and utilising the strengths of the device.



Gravity Mike

Designed with the Apple Watch in mind, this is a pretty simple puzzle platformer that asks you to play around with gravity to find a way out of closed-off rooms. Pixel art and constrained design means that it makes good use of the Watch's screen size.



Watch Quest! Heroes Of Time

With your phone acting as your kingdom's menu system and the Watch where your journey takes place, *Watch Quest!* inverts the relationship between devices that many have followed. From the makers of the *Shantae* series, it's a great-looking RPG.



Hatchi - A retro virtual pet

This game looks rather familiar… Having already found success as an iPhone app, it actually makes more sense as a tribute to Tamagotchi on the Watch's smaller screen. Take care of your pet, water, feed, wash and play with them, and see them evolve.



Runeblade

Another RPG that puts all the action on the Watch rather than your iPhone, this is a more traditional role-playing style with magical items to find, levelling up, crafting and much more. It makes some smart use of the hardware features too.

» cooler moments of asking people what happened on their various missions. Beyond that it's a pretty singular experience, but then so is the Watch."

Right now none of this feels like it's going to tap into a *Flappy Birds* level of gaming hysteria, so does the Apple Watch have what it takes to break through on a viral level? "It's only a matter of time before you have the next rogue sensation," Griffin believes. "We actually think that for Apple Watch owners, the device will become their main casual gaming platform. It's all about where a user spends their time. If they pull out their phone less because they only have to use their Apple Watch, then that's where they will play. We foresee a movement of casual games away from mobile phones much like casual games moved from desktops to mobile devices."

For Bossa it's less clear, but once the gaming community gets its hands on the Apple Watch it seems to believe new ideas will rise fast. "Millions of people looking at something collectively is very smart and they can make good decisions about how you can evolve that product," says Farquharson. "We're sending [*Spy_Watch*] out there, we're hoping people will understand where we're coming from and why we're doing it, they'll buy into that and we'll see what we can do in the future."

Griffin foresees the Apple Watch having a much larger impact on the entertainment world as it helps bind a wave of new tech together. "Aside from taking a huge cut of users away from mobile games as described earlier, we think it has a lot of potential for augmented reality games and providing more transparent ways for users to interact with responsive environments," he tells us. "With the onset of the Internet of Things and more specifically Apple's upcoming updates to Apple TV, HomeKit and CarKit, there's going to be a lot of opportunity for making the world more playful.

"The Apple Watch will sit at the crux of those systems because it will allow things like frictionless sign-in as well as a means to carry state between the different contexts. Once those technologies progress further, I'm sure we will find ways to misuse the tools to build games even more different than what we will see on the Apple Watch."

Right now there's definitely passion on the side of the developers, as they see which ideas capture our imaginations. "[*Spy_Watch* is] very different, and deliberately so, and maybe even a bit risky, but it's something that comes from really buying into the platform," adds Farquharson. "It's intimate, it's personal and it's everything that Apple is talking about. It's exactly what they've designed the Apple Watch for and in theory that should be a good match."

Both teams have approached the Apple Watch in different ways, but ended up in similar positions, waiting and seeing what happens next while pushing what the device can do, in order to get ahead of the next wave of advancements. Can the Apple Watch be a true gaming device? With a little more power it might be able to deliver the quality and fidelity of experience and interface we crave, but it can't be denied that the allure and magical pull of playing a game on such a discreet and personal device is strong. Whether we're pretending to be a spy or sneakily hitting a few balls out of the park, this is a new gaming device with real potential. 

IS THIS YOUR IDEA OF FUN?

Simulator games aren't the running joke they once were – but why? What is it that makes the banal captivating?

If you look back over the past five or so years in games, what do you see? Simulator games. Simulator games *everywhere*. *Ship Simulator Extremes*, *American Trucker: The Simulation*, *Infinite Scuba: The Scuba Diving Simulator*, even Waterpark Simulator. Aside from the simulation part of their titles, what do they have in common? Well, they were terrible. These games and many more like them were so bad they left what seemed to be an indelible mark on the sim genre. The abundance of rubbish games stunk up the joint, became something laughable.

But then a funny thing happened. The dust settled, the initial shock of 'They made a simulation game about *that*?!' passed and we realised that, actually, some of these games were alright. Some of these games, in fact, were pretty good. There's going to be a hardcore contingent that never changes its tune, that will always maintain that the simulation genre is something that belongs firmly in the realms of a 20-year-old *Simpsons* gag about *Yard Work Simulator*. But those of us willing to give this genre another chance have been left feeling unexpectedly positive about it, »


NEW HOLLAND
TRELLEBORG TM900

with the likes of *Euro Truck Simulator*, *Train Simulator* and *Farm Simulator* all thriving in a settled marketplace. The wheat, it seems, has been separated from the chaff.

"There was kind of a run of simulation games at one point, at least in the German market, selling quite well despite their quality issues," explained Christian Ammann, CEO and executive producer at *Farming Simulator* creator Giants Software. "It's all gone now," he continued, "The number of releases went down and there's just a few titles surviving. There are still companies trying to release poor, cash-in titles, but it's not the same companies, or they've changed a bit, or what some companies do – naming no names – they release the same game just with a different cover. If you look at the content, they've just changed a texture, but it's the same game year after year and they just try to trick people into buying it."

Ammann should know – he sits atop a small, Swiss-based studio that has gone from nothing in 2007 to over five *million* copies of his studio's series sold by 2015. *Farming Simulator* might be one of the games that springs to mind when the dismissive chatter surrounding the genre springs up, but it's very difficult to lump it in with the rest of the cash-grab half-games, even if it still doesn't look quite the part.

> "If the game is shit and the gameplay is shit and the game mechanics are shit, the best graphics don't save you"

But while some continue to use this as a stick with which to beat Giants' series, Ammann points out it's a case of balancing manpower and necessity. "Graphics aren't something about which we just say 'it doesn't matter at all'," he said, "It's just that other things are also important, it's not just the graphics. If the game is shit and the gameplay is shit and the game mechanics are shit, the best graphics don't save you. It can help to sell your game a lot, but if the game isn't good at its core, in the mechanics, it won't sell in the long term. It might have a big peak in the beginning, but it will go down very fast."

Ammann looks to the community to back up his claims, as he explains. "I watch YouTube videos of people playing, modders playing, guys streaming on Twitch – they don't care what it looks like. They just don't care. It's not the graphics – the graphics are good enough – it's what you can do in the game, you're there with your friends, you have this freedom… that's way more important than having high-end graphics." It's the sort of thinking you'd expect from a self-confessed tech-head, and a man who chuckled with some level of proud embarrassment that he and co-founder Stefan Geiger – also a programmer rather than an artist – had created the majority of art assets for the first *Farming Simulator* release. From day one, it was always about the core experience rather than the visuals.

Sticking with that mentality – a core experience of engaging, accessible fun over everything else – has seen *Farming Simulator* erupt in popularity around the entire world, while the likes of *Euro Truck Simulator* and *Train Simulator* have also trundled along at a steady pace, picking up new believers with each passing year. And yet, even with these games doing so well, selling so many copies and having the luxury of near-instant worldwide recognition, it seems hard to find many people who actually play them.

So who does play them? In the case of *Farming Simulator*, that answer surprised even those who work on the game: "It was pretty funny for me to realise who plays the game," Emil Drefers, script programmer at Giants explained, "You would think teenagers and younger kids living in a city with no nature around them would want to play, just so they could jump in a tractor, but it turned out farmers and kids of farmers would play the



Is woodcutting actually part of farming? Ammann argued yes, but also admitted some of the community were against introducing it.

The exotic allure of wheat

Farming Simulator is popular around the world, to varying degrees. With that popularity comes a need to cater to individual audiences around the world, with their different tastes, backgrounds and cultures. While Giants wouldn't be able to do it for every territory, the studio did pay close attention to its distribution in Japan, as Ammann explained: "We started in Japan with *Farming Simulator 2009*. Interestingly, we asked the local distributor what we should add to make it more appealing to the Japanese – adding rice fields, that sort of thing – and they said 'Add nothing – this game is interesting because it's exotic'. That's so interesting for us to learn. The only feedback they had was that they'd love to see how the plants grow in an animated fashion – that was it. As some Japanese titles are exotic to us, this is the same for them." So the version of *Farm Simulator* you can get in the Far East is exactly the same at its core as that you can pick up in Swindon. The only difference is how you see it – to the European players it's an escape to the familiar. To the Japanese it's a window to a world most people over there have never seen in real life.



Some laugh at the thought of harvesting in a game, but put the giant machinery under someone's control and they'll be captivated.

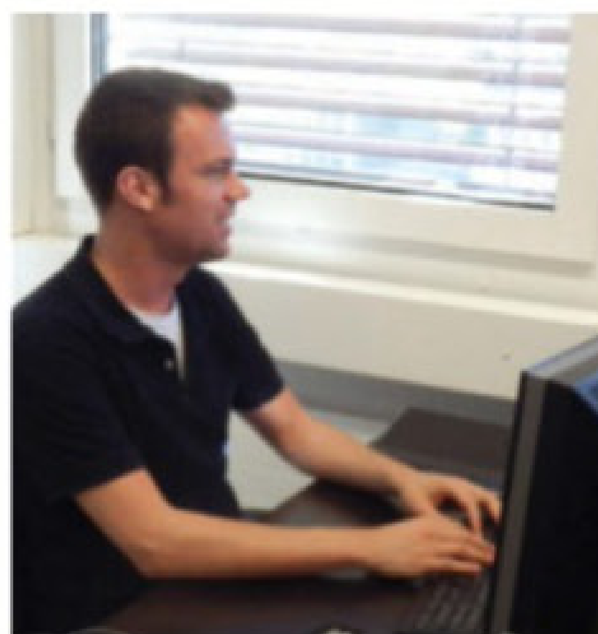


■ Oddly specific sim games are a calling card of the genre, as evidenced here in *Airport Firefighter Simulator*.





■ Christian Ammann has found there are more important things than graphics for this series.



■ Emil Drefers was surprised to find farming families enjoyed playing the simulator.

game. That was very surprising for me. One story that sticks out: nowadays the tractors drive the lines by themselves, in autopilot, and the farmer would sit there with a laptop, in the tractor, playing *Farming Simulator* while *actually farming*."

Ammann, meanwhile, sees other areas of appeal – children able to play a non-violent, educational, co-operative game with their parents: "We have a lot of feedback from parents telling us they have fun playing it with their kids," he said, "They learn things about how food is created and it's not violent – it makes sense." But there is a whole other world of players the world over, from the hardcore simulation fans who will riddle their games with mods to make it as realistic as possible (adding, for example, an opening window in a tractor, just because there's one there in real life), through the sim-junkies, who gobble up anything with S-I-M somewhere in its title and on to the more casual players – often older, usually not the type to class themselves a 'gamer' or owning a PC from after 2010, but no less into the experience of virtual farming, trucking, train driving, plane flying or whatever it is they pass their time with – and no less able to play it, thanks to low system requirements.

But what is the appeal of such a virtual activity? These are not your lively *Call Of Dutys* or *Assassin's Creeds* – they are based on carrying out what most of us would consider rather banal activities; jobs and professions that exist in the real world, presented without poetic licence and carried out without even one exo-suit in tow. Why would people want to spend hours shifting cargo or tilling fields if it's not for a paying job in the »


The problem with a lot of sim games – like Construction Simulator – is that there isn't much scope for messing about.


Just when we thought we'd seen every simulator game possible, along came *Chemical Spillage Simulator.* And yes, it's real.




Euro Truck Simulator has a prosaic effect, offering sweet respite from the stress of day-to-day living by allowing you out on the open road.

» real world? There's a question with many answers – it could be the universal appeal of the large machine, something we idolise in a way when we're very young. Having the chance to control one, even virtually, is a childhood dream – even if it doesn't end up staying with us for very long.

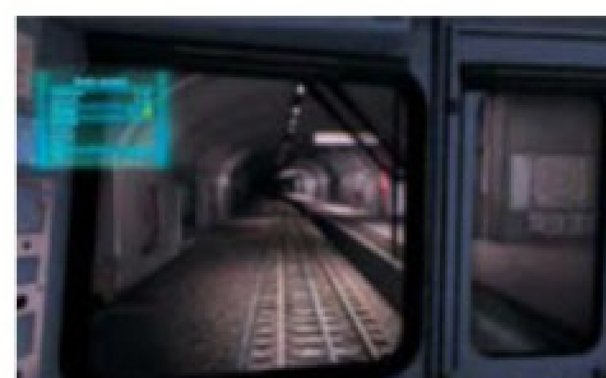
Then there's the easy answer to point to, in that simulation games have existed for almost as long as games themselves have – *SimCity* being an early, obvious example. We've partaken of these banal activities in the name of gaming entertainment for decades. But that just raises another point of interest – another reason why the facile is considered compulsive – these simulation titles, like *Farming Simulator,* actually have a hell of a lot more in common with your everyday triple-A title than might initially be thought.

"You not only have the progression on a field," Ammann explained, "You have the progression on your farm and with your equipment. You start with a small set, as you get more money you get bigger machines or enable new food types by purchasing new equipment to enable it. It's all a feedback loop." Just like in any other big budget game from EA, Activision, Ubisoft or whoever else, *Farming Simulator* and the other quality sim titles rely on a simple loop of activity, grind and reward. You plough the field to sow the seeds to harvest the corn to transfer it to the silo to sell it for profit to buy a bigger plough to cultivate quicker… and so on.

With that in mind, it's easier to see why the simulation genre has survived an onrush of shovelware even the Wii didn't see in its latter days. Tight mechanics wrapped around a solidly designed core and with a feedback loop that would put *Battlefield*'s online progression system to shame. But it doesn't end there – all of these games endure in popularity thanks to something the triple-A has lost in recent years: a committed modding community.


Some subjects are seen as normal – 'acceptable' – for simulation games, hence the million-selling *Cities: Skylines.*


When sims are seen as boring, it tends to come from games like *Logistics Company Simulator.* The title says it all.


Some sims you do just have to stop and think 'why?' *London Underground Simulator* is one of those – the virtual commute.

Farming Simulator comes with a full set of creation tools on the game's disc – this is the software Giants uses to make the game itself, not stripped back in any way – and Ammann is also proud of the fact the gameplay source code is released to the community to use as they see fit. But this isn't some bout of indie benevolence – Ammann points out that he doesn't consider Giants an indie studio at all, even with its 12 in-house employees (and 20 or so total). No, this is a move that comes direct from the big guns, as Ammann explained: "I learned to release all the tools and a lot of the source code for the game from Unreal Tournament, and that was by Epic Games. I was very impressed by that."

This attitude results in a positive developer-player relationship, with open doors on communication and a sense of real freedom and experimentation on both sides of the divide. "This is one of the most open games for modding that there is," Ammann said, "We have the guide books [written by Ammann], video tutorials, all the tools we use internally to make the game are on the disc. It's all there. We don't have more tools here, we share everything with the community, because we know they'll do great stuff. And it's a big part of the game – they really take it and do good stuff with it. If you look at the kind of mods that are released, it's really crazy – you can never believe the kind of things that they create."

Drefers agreed, pointing out how he regularly speaks to the community and offers them advice and tips on how to make the most of their mods: "The modders ask me about the best solutions for problems, or raise bugs and issues," he said, "So I give advice and give my knowledge back to the community." It's something he should know about, being a former *Farming Simulator* modder himself hired directly by Giants to work on the game he'd put so much of his free time into.

Ammann doesn't even consider *Farming Simulator* without mods, and looking at the active Steam Workshop pages for the *Euro Trucks* and *Trains* and flight sims and everything else, it's clear to see that modding is a *huge* part of the appeal in the genre. Even if you're not involved in the creation of these items, routes, seed-pile-sims or anything else, it's all there to be downloaded free of charge and added into your game. If it exists in the real world, it's likely going to have made it into one of the simulator games – even if it wasn't from the hand of the developer.

"I think it's a big part of the success," Ammann said, "The mods are really important. If you choose a random YouTube video, the chances mods are involved is huge. The amount of mods created is crazy – it's hundreds every day and released online." This does of course mean a lot of duds and a lot of carbon copies, but it also means a lot of great additions to a game and – in some cases – the kind of things you would never expect. "Somebody added aeroplanes and created a flight simulator," Ammann laughed, "While one created trains so you could drive around in a train on the game… there's some really crazy stuff. You can ride around on a tricycle as a little boy with a lollipop." It's maybe not what you'd expect at first glance, on seeing that tractor-sporting front cover and reading the most workmanlike game title possibly of all time.

> "Somebody added aeroplanes and created a flight simulator, while one created trains so you could drive around"

In a roundabout way, the reputation of *Farming Simulator* might actually be being held back by Giants' desire to keep the modders able to contribute: "There are some features we would love to have in the game," Ammann explained, "But we have to say 'we can't do it because this would make it very hard to mod'. Like for asset creation, there are optimisations we can make, making the graphics prettier or adding effects and so on – but we decided against it, as it would make the modding side much harder."

And maybe that's just it – these simulators have found their audience and are catering to them. They don't aim to be world-beaters, they don't even want to be 100-million sellers (though Ammann did pause a second when asked if he'd accept a hypothetical EA buyout), the developers are happy to keep working away at making banal activities captivating. While they continue to make games that are appreciated by the community and improve demonstrably year on year, they don't have to pay attention to the baying mob of nay-sayers, quick to throw their judgement at the feet of a game that offers an experience that – at its most stripped-down – is the same as what they spend their £55 a year on.

But Ammann doesn't claim his studio's game will break through to the mainstream, even with its PS4 and Xbox One release of *Farming Simulator 2015*. "The question is if it's even popular. Some people just don't like farming, so they would never play it," he said, "It's not as universal as other titles, I think… but we always keep trying to improve the market so we can sell more." It's easy to look back over those past five or so years and see many points where the bottom could have fallen out – maybe where it *should* have fallen out. But instead this is a genre that has survived; it is a genre that is seeing steady growth even when met with countless blank stares and never-ending questions of 'Why are you playing that?'

So long as the quality maintains, the positive word of mouth continues to spread and people realise there isn't anything 'wrong' with playing a simulator of the decidedly ordinary, we are going to see the genre grow, perhaps even thrive with careful cultivation and a few good seasons of growth this could be the genre to provide a bountiful harvest for more simulator developers. 

The weirdest (and worst) of the sim world

Some are inane, some are stupid, some are even hilarious



Street Cleaning Simulator

Making the banal compelling is something the best sim games do. *Street Cleaning Simulator* does not do this – and it's a buggy mess to boot. While that provides unintentional comedy, it's otherwise utter tripe.



Ski Region Simulator

Giants hasn't just produced the hits – it also produced a single version of *Ski Region Simulator*, a game in which you could fiddle with snow groomers.



Woodcutter Simulator

This would have been a good one – woodcutting in *FS2015* is good fun – if it weren't such a buggy mess. Almost as if it was pushed out with no regard for quality…



Mining Industry Simulator

We all know mining in games is fun – it's in a hell of a lot of them, after all. But what about the business side of things? Turns out it's intensely dull. Who knew?



Desert Bus

Possibly the original bus simulator, *Desert Bus* might have been a joke game but it recreated a true-distance eight-hour drive from Tuscon, Arizona to Las Vegas, Nevada.



I Am Bread

It would be understandable if you wrote off I Am Bread as 'too wacky', but this *Katamari*-meets-ridiculously intense difficulty is frustrating and amusing.



Goat Simulator

The sim genre got to the point where it was ripe for parody, and along came a game made in not very long at all with the express intention of being a brief, silly distraction.

gamesTM

Ridiculous GAME MECHANICS WE COULDN'T LIVE WITHOUT

GAMES ARE UNIQUE – WE FORGIVE THEM A *LOT* OF LITTLE ECCENTRICITIES WE WOULDN'T DREAM OF LETTING OTHER MEDIA GET AWAY WITH. TO CELEBRATE JUST HOW CRAZY SOME ESTABLISHED GAME TROPES ARE (AND HOW MUCH WE'VE COME TO TAKE THEM FOR GRANTED), WE THOUGHT LONG AND HARD ABOUT OUR FAVOURITE RIDICULOUS GAMING MECHANICS...



1 Amnesiac ENEMIES

How many times have you been pursued by a group of guards or something, then hidden around a corner, or in a hay bale, or some shadows, just to have the guards forget what they were doing in the first place, and wander off? Enemy logic in some games equates to the gameplay version of getting halfway up the stairs to forget what you were going up for. But without all that myopic amnesia, we'd certainly have been caught a lot more, so it's probably fine.







2 Exploding RED BARRELS

Visual language in games that are packed with items and enemies is a tricky thing to overcome, but a common sidestep to overcrowding a screen is the trusty red barrel. Got a group of enemies coming round the corner? Get that barrel in your sights. Things blocking your way? Look for a barrel. Think of all the mobs you'd still be struggling with if random butane dumps weren't handily placed in the most impractical of places.

Ridiculous GAME MECHANICS WE *COULDN'T* LIVE WITHOUT





Detective MODE

How do you communicate to players that Batman is the world's greatest detective without making *them* do crazy detective work? How do you let your audience know that Joel has developed an *amazing* sense of hearing? How can we see that master thief Garrett can identify entrance points on anything? The answer to all: detective mode. That fancy overlay that strips away colours and highlights interactive objects. If we had that in real life, we'd never misplace anything ever.

3

Impenetrable FENCES

You're a hero of the realm – an unstoppable force that's wrecking fools left, right and centre. You've just punched a god in the face until he died (*God Of War*). Yet that small fence is stopping you from moving forward, stopping you from continuing your mission. It's a trope that helps developers cordon off areas you're not supposed to be in yet, granted, but there could at least be a narrative angle other than 'A little fence, you say? Well, that's obviously *impossible* to get over.'



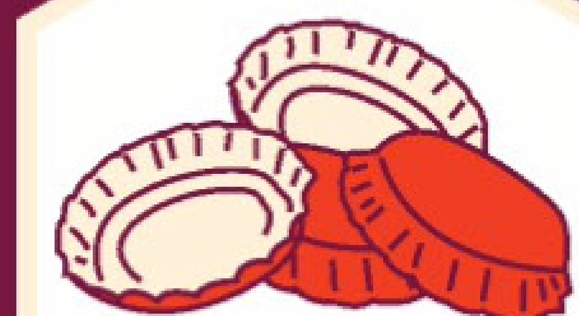


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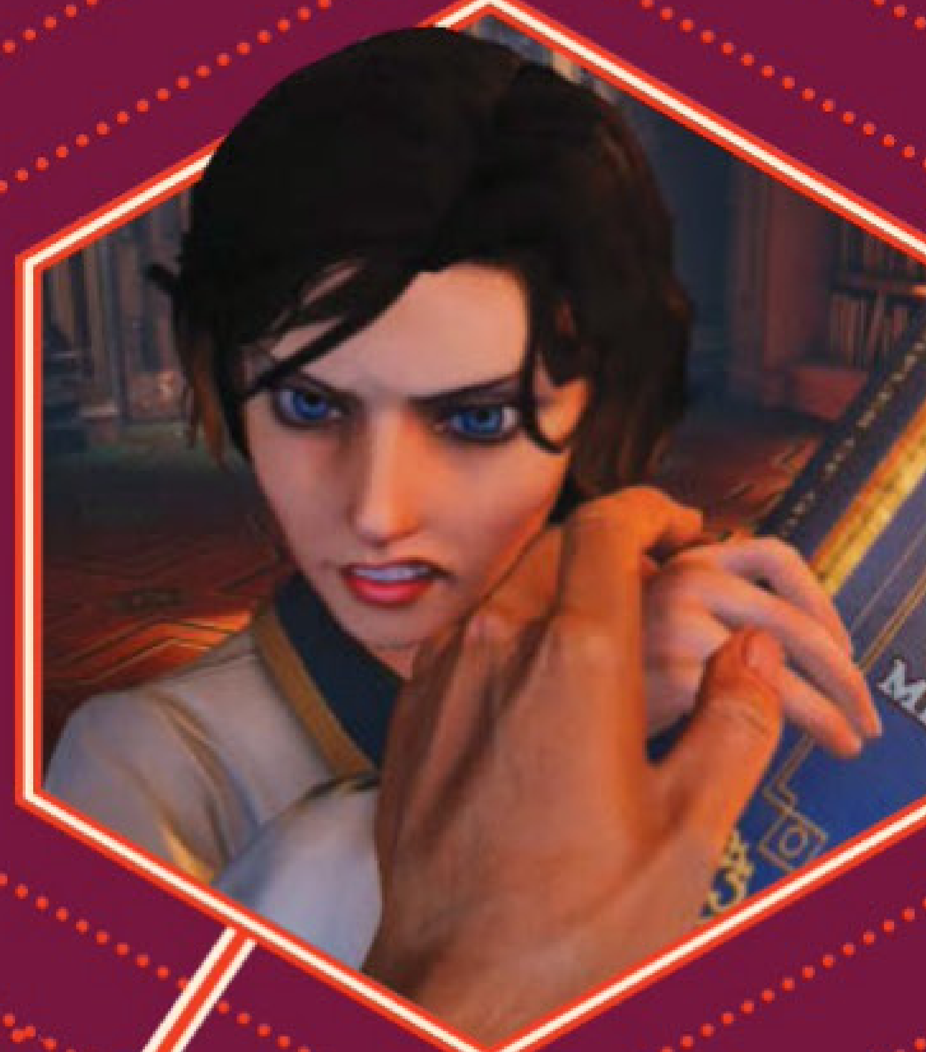
Bizarre CURRENCY



Bloodborne has blood echoes, the *Souls* series has, well, souls and *Devil May Cry* has the crystallised blood of demons. *Crash Bandicoot* had wumpa fruit, whatever that is. Ratchet and Clank could seemingly pay for everything in nuts and bolts, and the residents of *Viva Piñata* are assumedly cannibals since they pay for everything in candy, which is basically *their organs*. All that glistens truly isn't gold, after all, according to video games. Oh, and don't forget about bottlecaps in *Fallout*.



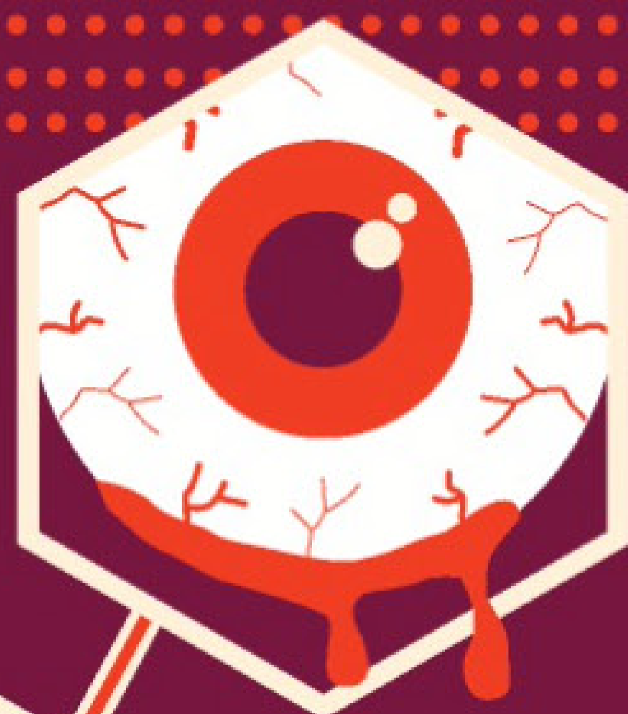
5



Immortal ESCORTS

"Shh, Ellie. There are men coming from that building over there, we need to take them down one by one. I'm going to walk over there, slowly, and you follow on my signal. One, two, thr–" and then Ellie runs off. Luckily, that seems to have no bearing on the encounter: Joel continues to plot his murderous route and Ellie just wanders around. Along with *BioShock*'s Elizabeth, *Half-Life*'s Alyx Vance, and almost every other gaming companion, it's a good job she's temporarily immortal.

6



7

TAKING DAMAGE MAKES YOUR *Eyes Bleed*

'I've been hit!' our character cries out to their allies, entrenched near a rock they're using as cover. We can tell we've been hit, because our vision has clouded with blood – despite the fact we got shot in the shoulder. How would that look in real life? Would you begin to seep blood from your tear ducts? Would that blood disappear once you apply a salve to your shoulder? So many questions.

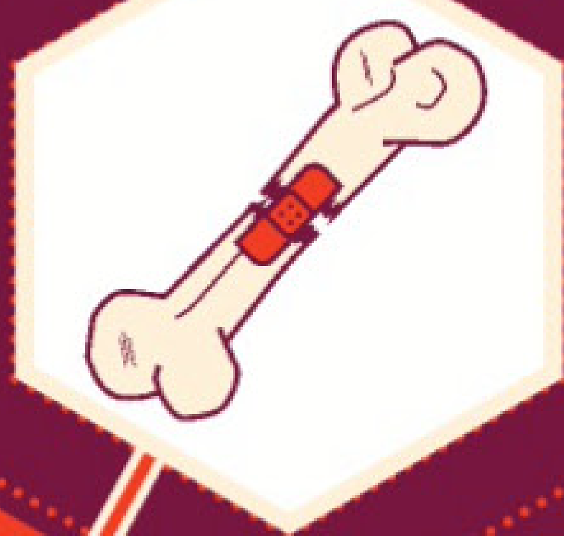




8

Shiny MONEY

Ever misplaced a fiver and spent *ages* looking for the damn thing? It's infuriating – at least we never have that problem in games, since, you know, all money apparently glows or has some kind of eldritch glint that means you can clock it from *miles* away. While money is the best example of this, it can extend to other loot, too – gems, bits of animal skin, space cash… anything valuable seems imbued with a curious glow.





10

HEALING *Anything* WITH BASIC FIRST AID

Resident Evil is the worst offender. Bitten by a zombie? Eat a herb. Get sliced up by a trap? Eat a herb. Get almost decapitated? Eat a herb. *Far Cry 4* is our favourite recent example – we got caught in a hail of bullets after our stealth approach failed, and as soon as we picked a single bullet out of our arm we regained a portion of health. Other games rely on bandages; any wound can be healed with a piece of material.

9

ENEMIES THAT *Take Turns*

Final Fantasy is probably the worst perpetrator of this trope, but JRPGs do seem to have a taste for it. It even happens in action games – you're there, slicing up an enemy (looking at you, *DmC*) and the assembled mass of enemies just wait on the periphery of combat, despite being eager to get involved. Yet they politely wait until you're done. How kind of them.

11

Infinitely PATIENT NPCS

'That's the way I want you to go,' says Morrigan in *Dragon Age* the first time we ask her. 'That's the way I want you to go,' says Morrigan in *Dragon Age*, the *fiftieth* time we ask her. She isn't alone, though – there are a *lot* more NPCs in gaming that have put up with our badgering. While it's been useful for those times we've forgotten what we're doing, we're amazed that no NPCs have ever stabbed us just to shut us up.





Ridiculous GAME MECHANICS WE COULDN'T LIVE WITHOUT

12



The Bag Of HOLDING

In *Persona 4: Golden*, we saved up 99 'homunculi' – you know, small humanoid creatures – for the end boss, which, along with our Soma Drops and ability cards and magic stones and outfits and weapons, were kept in our apparently *massive* bag that we took with us to the final dungeon. A lot of other games do this, too, but the image of some kids carrying around a pile of homunculi stuck with us. It's just a little… unsavoury, you know?



13



Nonsensical CRAFTING

Dying Light was pretty bad for this, in recent memory, but nonsense crafting systems have been around for a *long* time. *Dead Rising* also gets an honourable mention for the sheer creativity in its craftable items: a kayak paddle with two chainsaws strapped to it? A fantastic zombie-killing tool. Who knew a roll of duct tape and literally *anything* else could be mixed together to create a health potion or buffing tonic – it's a game trope we hated at first, but have certainly come to love.

14

The Rejuvenating POWER OF SITTING DOWN

Master Chief has just fought off a horde of Brutes, got a spiky grenade wedged under his helmet and been stabbed through the stomach with an energy sword. There are still some Grunts flailing around in the battle zone, but for now, Chief has to have a very important bit of a sit down. He rests and – yes! He's ready to jump back into the action. He must have learnt that from Soap MacTavish, Alex Mason or any of those other FPS action heroes.





15

Infinite AMMO

This tends to apply to pistols – mostly because they're so weak, it only makes sense to compensate with infinite ammo (*Splinter Cell* games are known for this, along with *Contra*). Mass Effect also had a system in its first game where you had infinite ammo, but you had to beware of a cooldown system on your weapons that'd render them temporarily useless. We loved that the most – it was a way of getting around the ammo problem while balancing out the game. We're hoping it makes a return in *ME4*.



USING Everyday Items TO SAVE

From toilets in *Dead Rising* to petting a cat in *The Evil Within*, ludicrous save spots are *everywhere* in gaming. You had to go to church in *GTA2*, you had to phone your dad in *Earthbound*, you had to sit on couches in the middle of dungeons in *Ico*… we love these crazy methods of writing data because it makes games far less tedious, plus, we can't help but think of how handy it'd be in real life: with an instant re-do if you screw something up.

16







17

Unlocked RPG DOORS

What would you do if we just wandered into your house and started going through your stuff? We open that footlocker you've got at the end of your bed, we raid your cupboards for food, we search your closets for valuables. We even look in your bin. Would you be polite to us and give us another item worth a couple of thousand yen, like the residents of *Pokémon* games? Would you give us quests or helpful information, a la *Final Fantasy*? Or would you hide, terrified, hoping we don't find you, calling the police at the earliest moment?



18

Holstering INFINITE GUNS

How would a weapon wheel work in real life? You could probably get a pistol and a hand-cannon on your belt, an assault rifle across your back, maybe a shotgun strapped to your leg and maybe a sniper in your arms? Being able to equip more than two weapons at once was a staple part of gaming until *Halo* happened and got all realistic (sort-of) on us, and we miss those days. Bring back the weapon wheel, developers – let us go mad with power (and guns!).



19

Gigantic Red WEAK SPOTS

This one is pretty self-explanatory: you'd think the Darwinian evolution that lead to a boss being at the very top of the food chain would have, somewhere along the line, gotten rid of those massive glowing weak spots they've got, pointing you to their vulnerabilites. Case in point – any of the massive monsters from *Lost Planet*, any boss in *Bayonetta*, any *God Of War* encounter, and pretty much any boss in the *Borderlands* series.







20

The Very Idea OF RESPAWNING

Aside from a few games, like the original *BioShock*, or maybe *Rogue Legacy*, that give actual reasons for your respawning, most approaches to the over-used trope are lazy. In *Call Of Duty*, you're supposedly just one of a never-ending supply of identically-armed cadets. In *Halo*, you're one of the few Spartans left in operation… yet there's a couple of million of you, apparently. If every game had permadeath we'd never get anything reviewed – but it makes the least sense of all the entries.



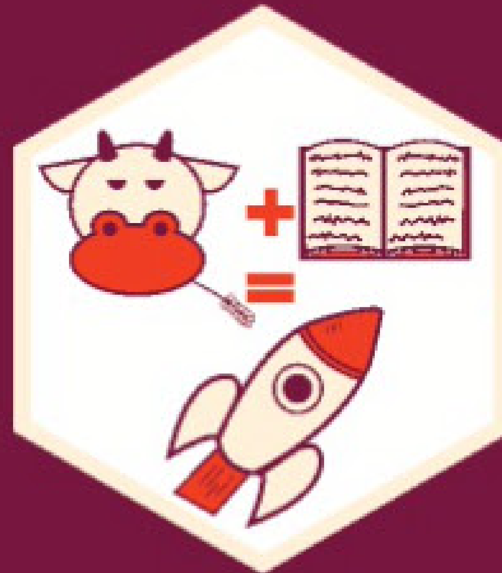
21 Questionably PRESERVED FOOD



In *BioShock: Infinite*, after Columbia devolved into a warzone, it seems all the local trash collectors decided to pack their jobs in – as a result, Booker could happily sift through the assorted rubbish of Columbia's residents and come across chocolate bars, apples, all sorts of food. You could loot milkshakes off demons in *Death Spank*, and the infamous 'floor chicken' in Streets Of Rage had its perks… how this surely rotten food *gives* you health, we'll never know.



22 Illogical SKILL TREES



Who'd have thought that animal husbandry and literature would put you on the front foot when it comes to the space race (*Civilization*)? Or that learning how to fire more arrows per minute would lead to you being better at potions (*Diablo*)? We tend to view skill trees from the top down, looking for the best perks and figuring out the quickest way of getting there. Unfortunately, this often means collecting myriad useless (if fun) points on the way up.

23 Bizarrely SPECIFIC MAPS

See: any Ubisoft game. If you're out adventuring, you might have a rolled-up bit of papyrus with some rushed scrawling on it tucked away. In more modern times, you might have an app that uses GPS to track your position. What you won't have, in any circumstance, though, is the knowledge and cartographic skill to know *every* landmark, collectible, mission, and thing-you-can-interact-with. We're glad the developers put them in, though: it means we don't have to sit *for hours* looking up collectable locations online.



24 Merchants THAT STALK YOU

Fire Emblem has always had Anna, a travelling merchant that follows you around and never has the best items until you don't really need them. That's indicative of all the stalky merchants games have to offer, really – the shady vendor in *Resident Evil 4* just shows up when he pleases, much like Beedle in *The Legend Of Zelda: Wind Waker*, who goes from turning up in docks in populated cities (sensible for business) to following you to the end of the world, docked at random docks *just for you*.





25 Idiotic BOSSES

How many times have you wandered into a boss arena to be confronted with the big bad itself just resting right there, surrounded by an array of severely hazardous traps, mines or crates, often specifically dangerous to the boss? *Jak & Daxter, Crash Bandicoot, Spyro The Dragon, Knack*, any *Lego* game… If we were to become the head of an evil empire, we would lure our enemies into an empty room – that way, that seemingly innocent *explosive barrel* we left there might not blow up in our faces…





WHY I ❤...

SUPER MARIO 64

TIM WILEMAN, ASSISTANT PRODUCER, TT GAMES

“I’ve been playing games for a number of years now, but one of the games that’s inspired me the most… well, I was a young man looking to get a job in the industry, working in a videogames shop and the Nintendo 64 had just come out, and Super Mario 64 *was released. Well, that just changed the world for me to be honest – the graphical style, the colour and vibrance of the game…it blew my socks off. I’ll never forget it, you know? Nintendo managed to create this fantastic world and it had so much cool gameplay, so much excitement… it was the transition from 2D to 3D, it was a really special time for games. I know that’s kind of clichéd to say now, but there’s a reason people say it, you know? Nintendo, at the time, they just really* did *tap into something magical.”*





“The graphical style, the colour and vibrance of the game… it blew my socks off”
TIM WILEMAN, ASSISTANT PRODUCER, TT GAMES



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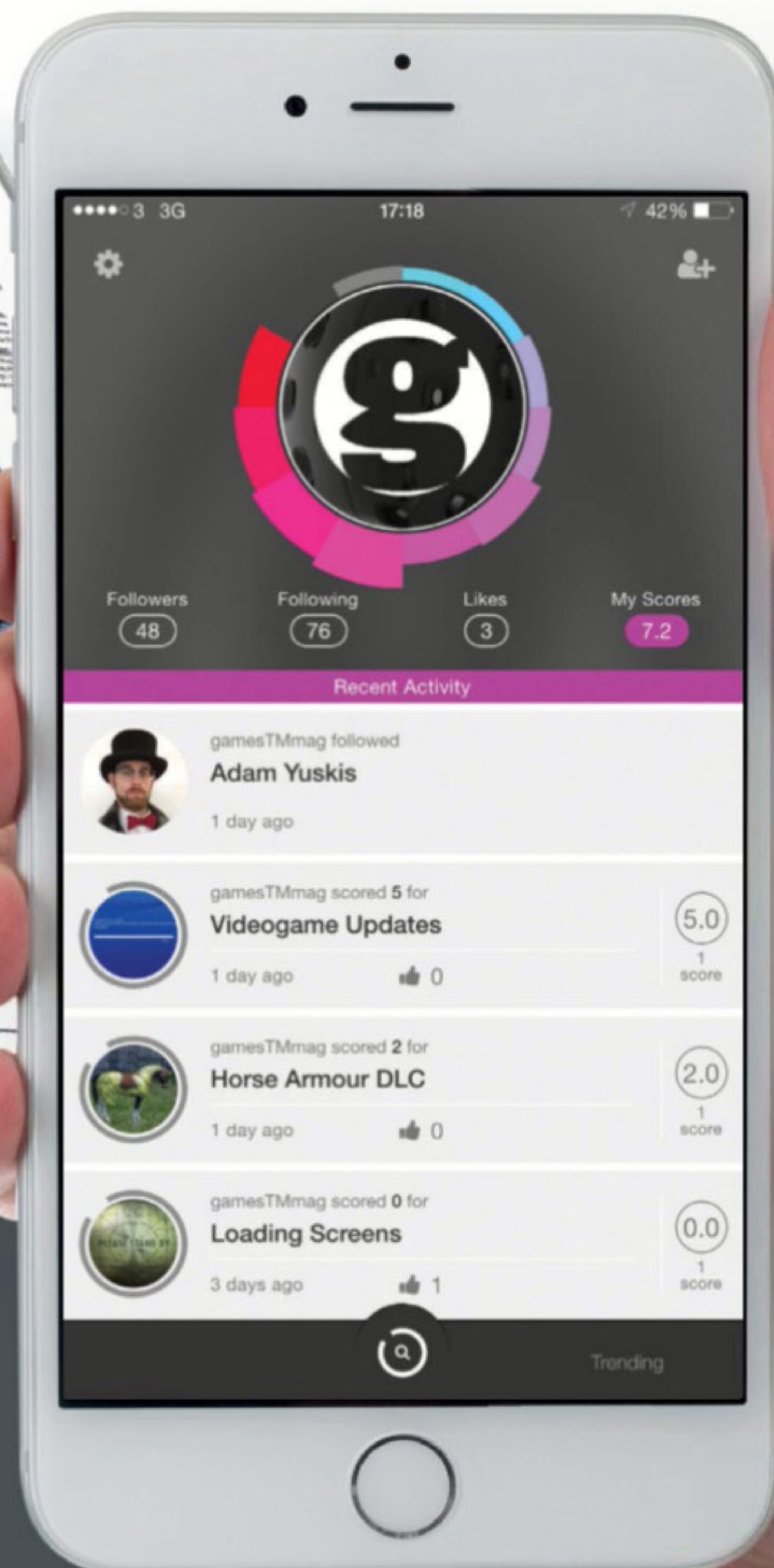
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Jon Gordon
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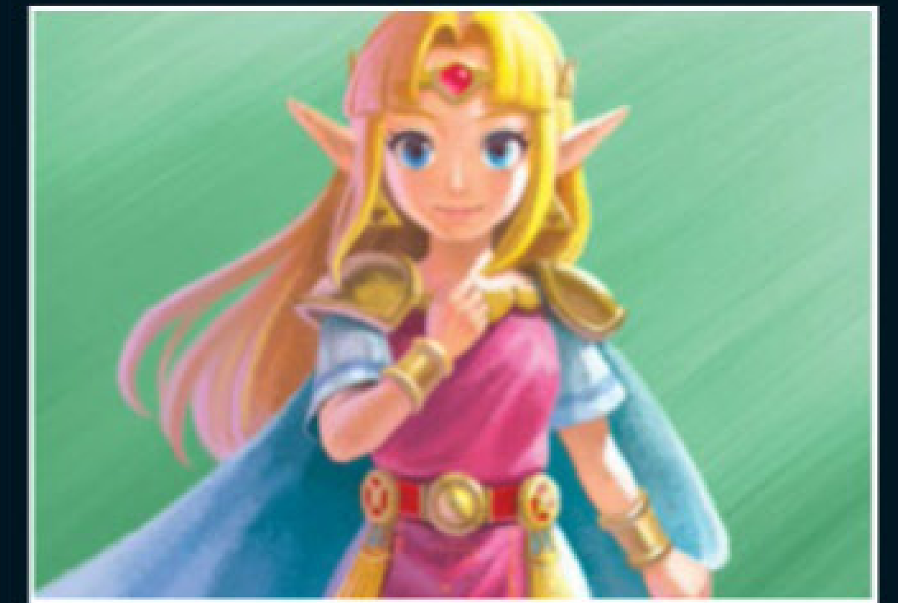
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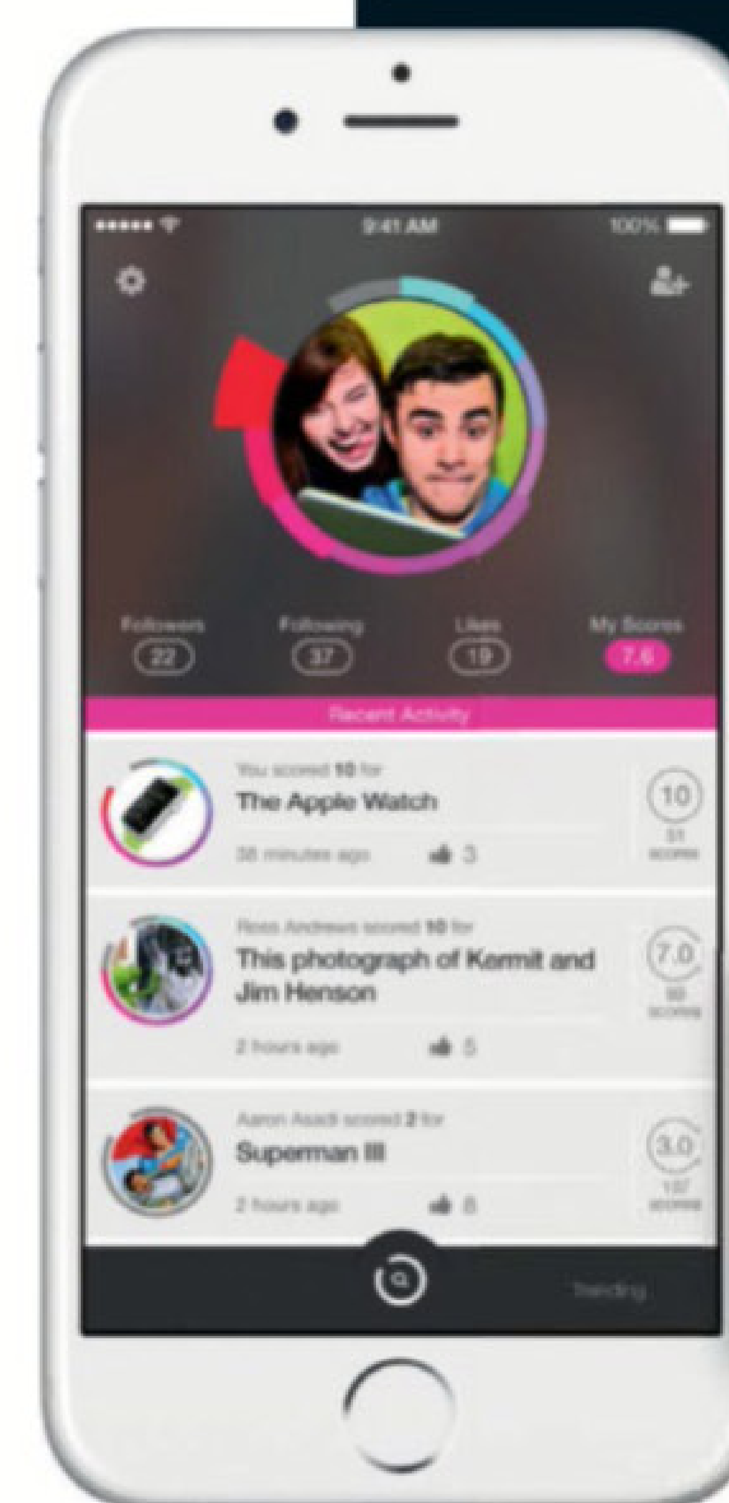
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Our gaming loves & hates…

You can score absolutly anything on Just a Score. This month we've been picking apart some of our favourite (and most hated) things in the industry…

- 10 — gamesTMmag scored **10** for Zelda (as a princess' name)
- 9 — gamesTMmag scored **9** for Hideo Kojima
- 8 — gamesTMmag scored **8** for Playing Renegade
- 6 — gamesTMmag scored **6** for Playing Paragon
- 2 — gamesTMmag scored **2** for Horse Armour
- 0 — gamesTMmag scored **0** for Loading Screens



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Reviews



82

MORTAL KOMBAT X

It's packed with gore, but does NetherRealm's fighter pack the same ferocious punch as its forebears?



THE AVERAGE

Three of the numbers in a ten-point scale are of greater importance than the others: five, seven, and of course, ten. Some publications would fool you into believing that a 7/10 game is average, but that just doesn't make sense to us. **games™** reviews videogames on their entertainment value, and so any title that simply performs to an adequate standard will receive a 5/10. Simple. The elusive ten is reserved for games of incredible, irrefutable quality, but please be aware that a score of ten in no way professes to mean perfection. Perfection is an unattainable goal, and on a ten-point scale nothing should be unattainable. Again, simple. Our reviews are not a checklist of technical features with points knocked off for flaws, neither are they a PR-pressured fluff-fest – we'd never let that happen, and besides you'd smell it a mile off. And finally, the reviews you find within these pages are most certainly not statements of fact, they are the opinions of schooled, knowledgeable videogame journalists, designed to enlighten, inform, and engage. The gospel according to **games™**.


84


86


88


98


96


103

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KOME AT ME BRO

Mortal Kombat X

Realising it shouldn't rock a boat it spent so long trying to stabilise, NetherRealm has made *Mortal Kombat* X more an evolution of its predecessor than another completely new offering. Throughout the entire noughties the *Mortal Kombat* series was the living embodiment of one of its defeated characters at the end of a fight: standing there helpless, dazed and swaying, waiting for a publisher to 'finish it' by pulling the plug. Then the 2011 reboot came along and breathed new life into the flagging franchise, completely revamping the fighting engine and delivering a much improved experience. This is more of the same.

The fighting system will be very familiar to those who played the 2011 game. The same combo system remains in place, with generous button timing designed to ensure relative newcomers can still pull off satisfying chains of moves. The super meter also returns from the previous entry, giving players new abilities as each of its three bars are filled: special 'EX' moves at one bar, combo breakers at two bars and the elaborately grotesque, wince-inducing X-Ray moves when you fill all three.

NetherRealm has also brought over a feature from its DC spin-off *Injustice: Gods Among Us*, the ability to interact with certain parts of the environment. Players can tap the R1 button to spring off background walls and land on the other side of the screen, or grab nearby objects and hurl them at their opponents. Stage interaction was fun in *Injustice* and it's no different here, making the arenas feel slightly less flat and generic.

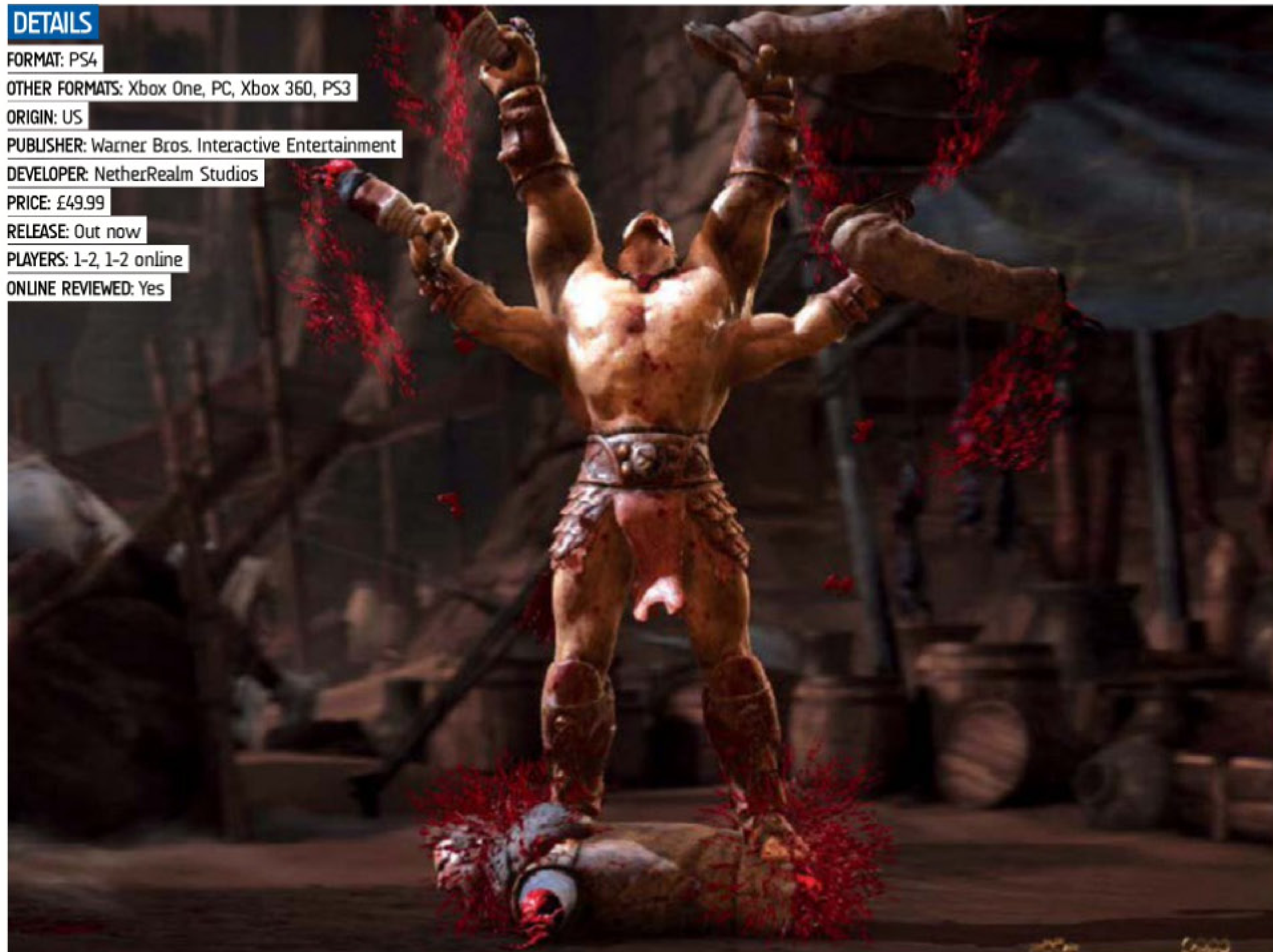
That isn't something you could ever say about *Mortal Kombat*'s trademark fatalities, however, and here they're even nastier than ever. While there are still a handful of finishers that call on the series' trademark sense of humour - Johnny Cage and daughter Cassie in particular have darkly comic kills - the majority are gloriously unpleasant, with little quirks like gurgling death rattles and bubbling stomach acid offering an arguably unnecessary attention to detail.

New to the series and creating some rather unnecessary controversy among players are 'easy fatalities', a way to perform finishing blows with a less complicated input (usually by simply holding a trigger and pressing a button). The drama is caused by the fact that these are a finite resource, used by spending tokens that can be topped up with real money microtransactions. This would be more of an issue were the fatalities not already very easy to pull off with the standard input combination, right down to giving the player the option to permanently display the button command on-screen as you fight.

More important, then, is who you'll be performing these fatalities as. The character roster consists of 24 fighters, plus regular boss enemy Goro if you pre-ordered or are willing to buy him separately. Each character has three different fighting styles to choose from between each fight, but these aren't so massively different that it feels like it's tripling the roster. Instead, each fighting style gives your character a couple of extra moves that let you tweak them to suit your playing style. If you're more offensive-minded you can give Sub-Zero the ability to swing a massive ice sword, but if you're more of a defensive player you can instead make him able to create ice shields or decoys.

The best way to get to know each fighter is the Story mode, which lasts around five hours and lets you get to grips with a wide selection of characters as it progresses. For the most part it's a brilliantly presented mode, with compelling cut-scenes and seamless fight sections, but it isn't entirely perfect. The story can be a bit erratic with the timeline jumping all over the place, and it does get a little frustrating at times when legacy characters who aren't playable in this game (like Sindel and Baraka) turn up for a fight, making you wonder why they aren't in the main roster. It also scatters some quick-time events throughout the cutscenes, though their inclusion is a little bewildering because for the most part failing them has no influence on the story's progression. Nevertheless, it's still a fun solo experience in general and does a good job of continuing the long-running *Mortal Kombat* tradition of the necessity for a ridiculous plot.

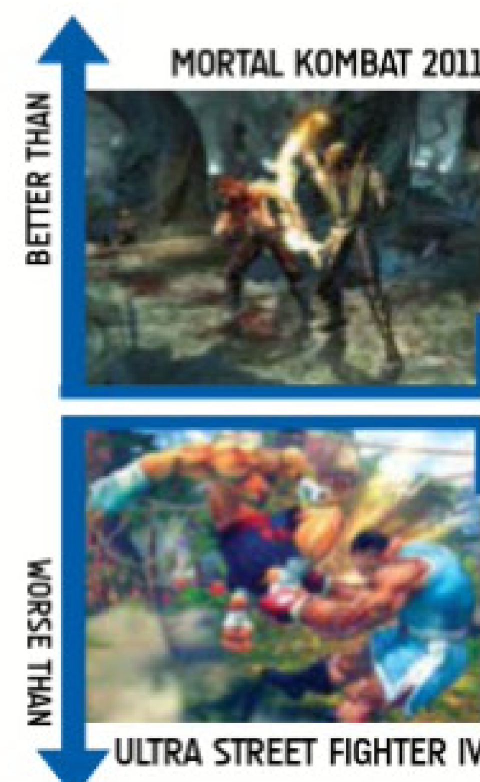
Below: Goro was a pre-order bonus but you're still able to buy him as DLC. Given he used to be a boss he's a powerful fighter, as demonstrated by his vicious fatality in which he simultaneously removes all four of his opponent's limbs.



DETAILS
- FORMAT: PS4
- OTHER FORMATS: Xbox One, PC, Xbox 360, PS3
- ORIGIN: US
- PUBLISHER: Warner Bros. Interactive Entertainment
- DEVELOPER: NetherRealm Studios
- PRICE: £49.99
- RELEASE: Out now
- PLAYERS: 1-2, 1-2 online
- ONLINE REVIEWED: Yes

FATALITIES ARE GLORIOUSLY UNPLEASANT, WITH QUIRKS LIKE GURGLING DEATH RATTLES AND BUBBLING STOMACH ACID

BETTER THAN: MORTAL KOMBAT 2011



WORSE THAN: ULTRA STREET FIGHTER IV



TALES FROM THE KRYPT

Recent *Mortal Kombat* games have always featured a special Krypt section that lets players unlock goodies with earned coins, and here it's no different. This time however the Krypt is presented in the style of an enormous dungeon crawler game, with the player travelling through various creepy locations in an attempt to find characters' scattered weapons which in turn gain access to locked areas. As you do you'll be able to spend coins to break open statues, unlocking new fatalities, costumes, concept art and music. It's brilliantly atmospheric but be warned: it's also got its fair share of jump scares, something those with a fear of spiders should probably be aware of before they play.

FAQs

Q. WHAT'S THE BEST FATALITY?
Johnny Cage replicating *The Shining* by tearing a hole in his opponent's chest, peering through and declaring "Heeere's Johnny".

Q. ANY DLC?
The £24.99 Kombat Pak adds new costumes and four new characters, including horror icons Jason Voorhees and the Predator.

Q. WHERE'S SHANG TSUNG?
The ever-popular shapeshifting character isn't playable in this. He isn't dead though: he appears in a couple of character endings.



Left: Of the new characters in *Mortal Kombat X*, Ferra and Torr are perhaps the most interesting. Counting as one character, Ferra is a small warrior who sits on the shoulders of the massive brute Torr, thereby offering both speed and power.

Above: The Krypt, which is where you go to unlock costumes and fatalities, is home to all manner of jump scare-heavy creatures.

Once the story mode's complete the game's single-player longevity ultimately comes down to your interest in the traditional *MK* tower format, which essentially makes up the rest of the solo offerings. As well as the standard arcade-style towers that have you fighting a number of enemies before reaching the final boss and an ending, there are now 'living towers': special ones with set fight variations which update on a daily, weekly and hourly basis and let you compare your score with the rest of the world.

Sadly, the game's online multiplayer is slightly less endearing, which is a huge shame considering that this such is a huge part of this kind of game. Its netcode is such that when two players with good connections compete, the gameplay is perfect, but face off against someone with a poor connection and the resulting stuttering or occasional input lag can make things a little frustrating for both parties. This is obviously the case in many games, but players are only shown an opponent's ping at the same time as a message informing them that quitting now will result in a loss: an ability to filter weak connections would be useful.

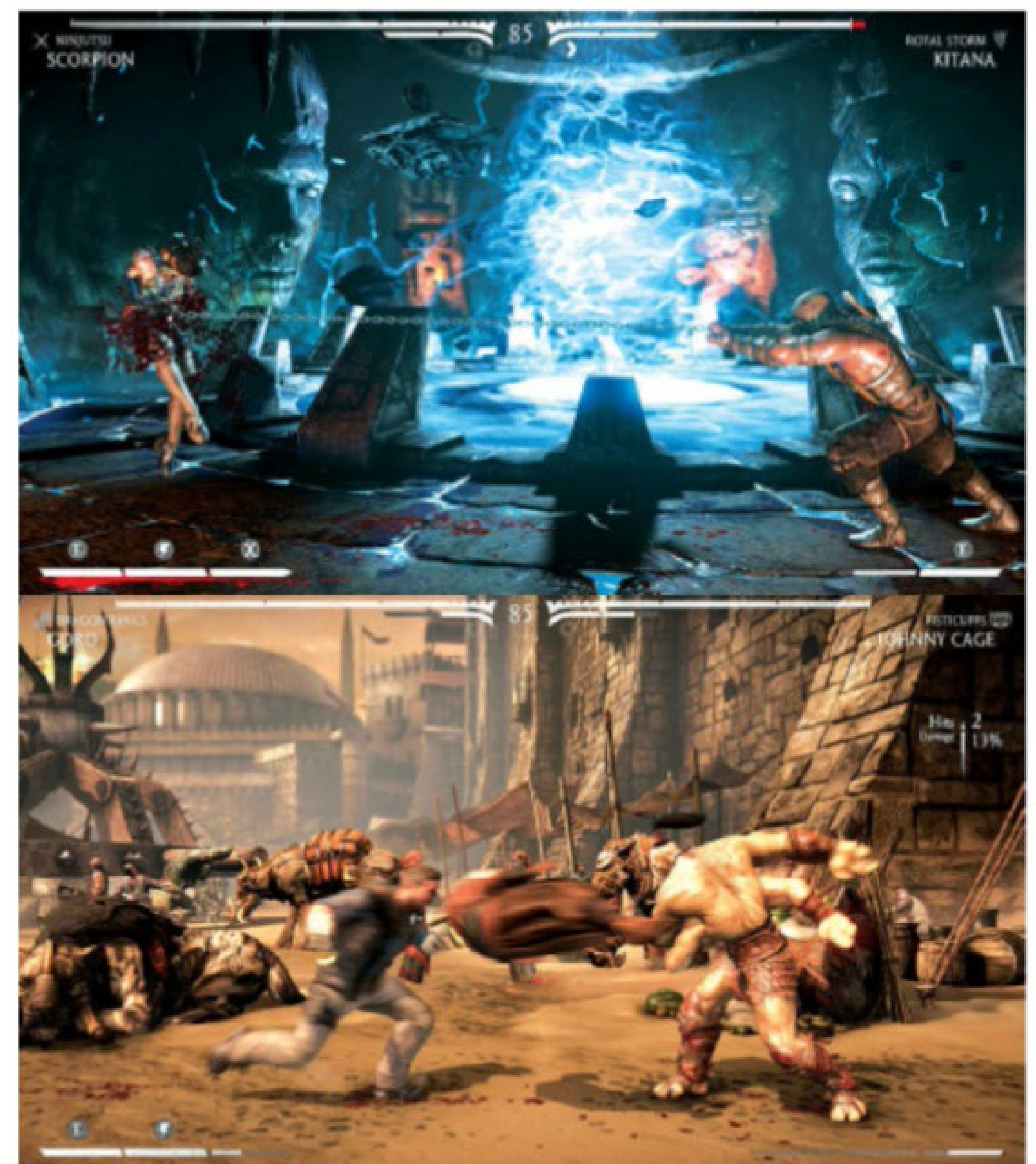
Despite this online stumble, *Mortal Kombat X* is arguably the best game in the series so far. Those looking for a massive new-gen leap over the ninth game will be a little disappointed, though considering the massive stride *MK9* took it was always going to be unlikely this would be similarly revolutionary. Instead it admirably builds on that already impressive accomplishment, and makes for a solid entry in the series.

WORLDWIDE
TAKING GAMING ONLINE

CLAN WARS: A new Factions system asks you to pledge your allegiance to one of five clans, rewarding you with bonuses when your faction's combined contributions each week outdo those of the others.

VERDICT
NO FLAWLESS VICTORY, BUT THE CLOSEST ATTEMPT YET

8
gamesTMmag scored **8** for
Mortal Kombat X
Follow our scores on JUST A SCORE



Above: Not even bystanders are safe in *Mortal Kombat*: you get an achievement/trophy for chucking this old woman at your opponent.

MARK OF THE TEMPLAR

Assassin's Creed Chronicles: China

DETAILS

FORMAT: Xbox One
OTHER FORMATS: PS4, PC
ORIGIN: UK
PUBLISHER: Ubisoft
DEVELOPER: Climax Studios
PRICE: £7.99
RELEASE: Out now
PLAYERS: 1
ONLINE REVIEWED: N/A

If two *Assassin's Creed* games in November weren't enough for you, Ubisoft is back to milk a little bit more out of its most lucrative franchise with three short adventures. These 2.5D stealth platformers will tell the stories of a trio of assassins that you may have come across if you're really, really into the series (as in, you read the spin-off comics), but to every normal person, they're a triumvirate of hooded strangers.

The first of the three, *Assassin's Creed Chronicles: China*, tells the story of Shao Jun, an assassin who has some serious beef with certain elements of the Chinese dynasty. The story is told elegantly and briefly in hand-painted cutscenes, but unlike the mainline *AC* games, never actually gets in the way of the action. The voice acting is decent and the motivations succinct. This isn't a game that's in love with its own narrative.

And if you were wondering how the expanse and breadth of *Assassin's Creed* could possibly be translated into two (and a half) dimensions, then the answer is 'Not at all, not really'. This is an *AC* game by name, but shares little in common with how those games actually play. Here we have a faster breed of stealth, heavily influenced by Klei's stunning *Mark Of The Ninja*, and less concerned with scope as it is slick movement and accurate, deadly murder.

So if you have ever experienced *Mark Of The Ninja*, you'll find this instantly familiar. Enemies have vision cones that are mapped directly onto the action, sound is represented by expanding circles whose radiuses grow as you or anyone else gets louder. It works here because it worked so well before, and it only takes seconds to find yourself scampering up a wall and knifing a guard from below.

Stealth is absolutely the order of the day, too, but it's very unfussy. The parameters are so clearly defined that you have a sense of mastery over the environment, and when you do expose yourself, it's much easier to blame your own inadequacy than the game. Most of the time you'd sneak into hiding spots that are actually

Right: Shao Jun is one of only two female leads in the history of *Assassin's Creed*, but seeing as you still play essentially as a hooded avatar, it unsurprisingly makes the experience no different.

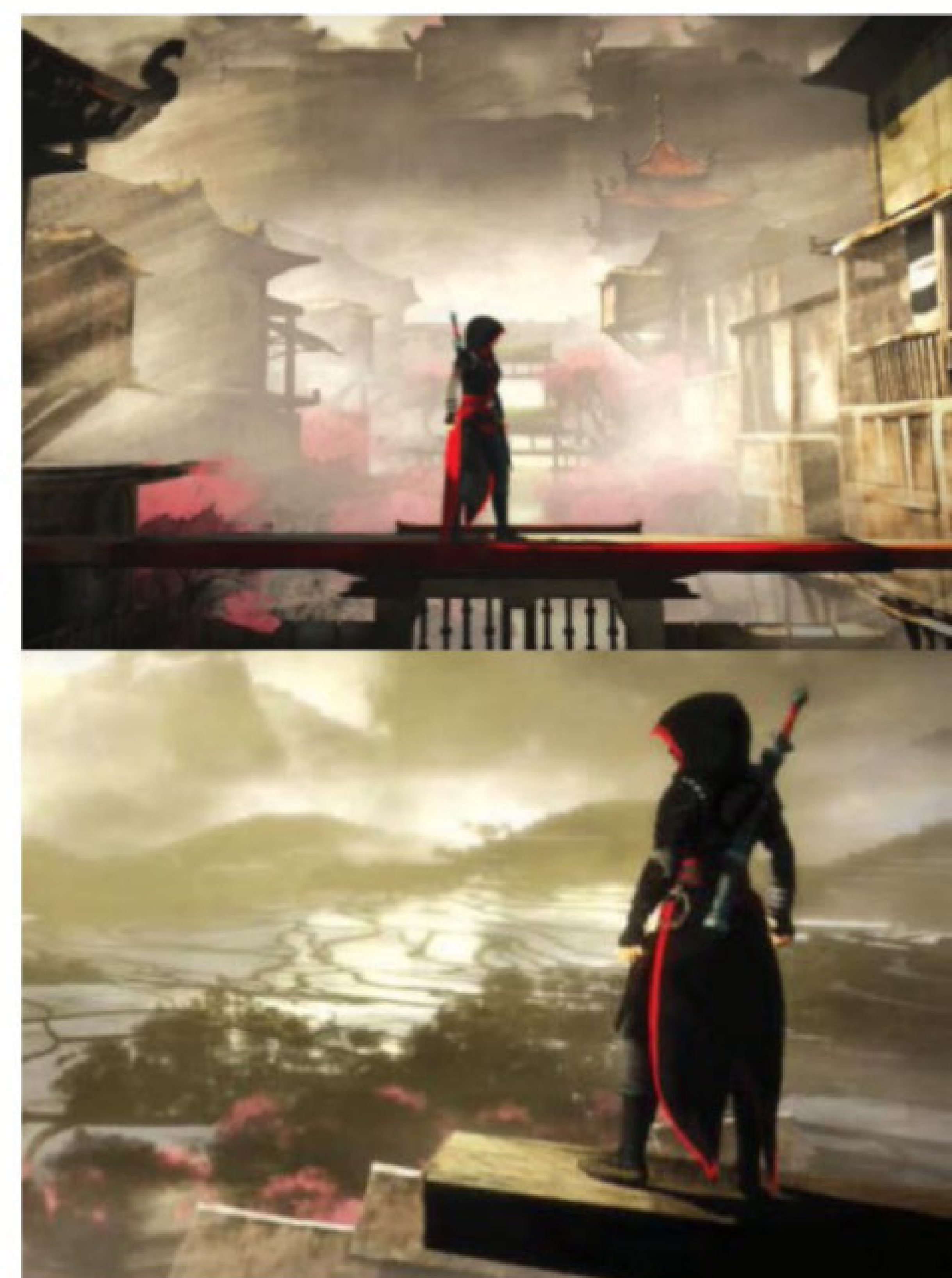


Above: Quite how Climax is going to stretch to another two games in this mould is a mystery – it already feels like it has run its course.

Below: As you progress, you unlock more interesting gadgets, but there's nothing we haven't seen before in other stealth games. *Chronicles* feels like it's happy just emulating other games and doing it well.



A COMFORTABLY BETTER GAME THAN THE BUGGY MESS OF ASSASSIN'S CREED UNITY



Above: The colour palette is muted but it suits the action, and the animation is universally excellent. The lack of enemy variety showcases the game's presumably truncated budget, but it's still beautiful.



GO GADGET GO

Assassin's Creed has always made great use of gadgets, and more inventive players have taken to using everything in their arsenal to overcome an increasingly complex set of enemies. Here, Shao Jun hasn't mastered the art of crafting like some of her three-dimensional contemporaries, so her ammo kit is smaller than Ezio's or Kenway's, but nevertheless she has a few tricks up her sleeves, and we're not just talking wrist-blades. You can use throwing knives to aggro guards as well as slice ropes in the environment. Firecrackers can stun unsuspecting enemies and create distractions. And there's a mean rope knife that can slice enemy throats as well as hook itself to different parts of the environment.



carved out of the level on a different plane to your enemies, before yanking them into their grave or simply scuttling past them and onto the next section.

In fact, the first hour basically tells you exactly what to do at all times, which in these post-*Bloodborne* times feels a little bit too patronising. *Assassin's Creed Chronicles: China* improves when you're let off the leash, and each area becomes its own stealth puzzle, as you navigate hiding spots, enemy patrols and platforming sections, trying to either sneak through unseen, or slaughter everyone before they work out you're there. The levels are divided into neat sections, meaning you can't get spotted once you're through an invisible door, and checkpoints are very generous – you'll rarely have to repeat anything.

Inevitably, though, you can't be great at everything all the time, and you will eventually run into trouble. Shao Jun has you covered, though, by being rather handy with a sword. The classic block-and-counter rhythm of *Assassin's Creed* is replicated, even down to a tidy flip over a staggered enemy's back, but it's not a deep system. Get assaulted by more than two enemies and you're almost certainly dead, and when you throw in ranged enemies as well as the always annoying 'dudes-with-shields', it's safe to say that sneaking is a far more efficient way of getting around.

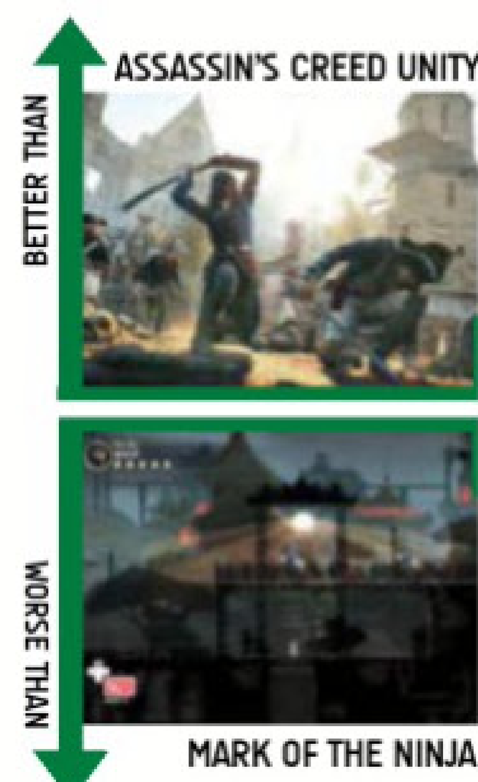
FAQs

Q. WHAT IS THIS, THEN?
One of three smaller stories in the Assassin's Creed Universe.

Q. HOW IS IT DIFFERENT?
It's a 2.5D stealth game that's almost exactly like *Mark Of The Ninja*.

Q. BETTER THAN UNITY?
It's far less ambitious, but it works perfectly and is solidly enjoyable.

BETTER THAN — ASSASSIN'S CREED UNITY



WORSE THAN — MARK OF THE NINJA

A particular highlight comes from the 2.5d perspective itself. Rather than just having you bend around corners, the levels are actually layered, not unlike *LittleBigPlanet*, but on a much larger scale. You can sneak behind other sections of the level, and some areas are three and even four planes deep. Most of the time it's just visual trickery with little impact on gameplay, but it's hard to fault because it looks so damn cool.

It's a focused game, and that's rarely been something you can say about *Assassin's Creed*. And despite its brevity (clocking in at around four hours), it's a comfortably better piece of work than the buggy mess of *Assassin's Creed Unity* – in fact it's the freshest series entry since *Black Flag*, despite the obvious homage to *Mark Of The Ninja*.

Unlike Klei's game, though, *Assassin's Creed Chronicles: China* lacks truly exceptional level design. While some stages do offer alternate routes and a few courses of action, for the most part you're solving single stealth puzzles, waiting for the times the game has deemed it safe to continue. This loses its appeal fairly rapidly, and the second half of the campaign is a little rote and formulaic. *Mark Of The Ninja* is a game that rewards experimentation and always feels like it has another solution up under its hood, but *Assassin's Creed Chronicles: China* just can't match its technical excellence. Considering another two of these games are due in the near future, it's going to be tough for the team at Climax to innovate and shake the feeling of malaise it eventually casts over you.

Luckily, this is one of those titles that benefits from a short running time, as before it gets really workmanlike it's all over. Even at four hours, there's an argument for the development team being even harsher with its editing and really tightening every section up into a killer three hours, but *Assassin's Creed* has never really been a series you'd associate with the word 'tight'.

An enjoyable if obvious knock-off, then, and a refreshing new direction for a stagnant franchise, but hardly the kind of revolution that would worry the Templars.

FINGERPRINT

WHAT MAKES THIS GAME UNIQUE

BACK AND FORTH: The 2.5D tricks give the levels depth and are a consistently fun visual

SMOOTH ASSASSINATOR: For a series with often clunky controls, this is surprisingly responsive.

VERDICT

REFRESHING FOR THE SERIES, BUT STILL UNDERWHELMING

gamesTMmag scored **6** for
6
Assassin's Creed Chronicles: China
Follow our scores on JUST A SCORE



Above: After *Act 1* tackled the issue of a world in which trees can talk, this woodcutter has turned metallurgist. Unfortunately, he's only really at the hobbyist level and thus not quite as useful as he might be otherwise.

BROKEN SPACESHIPS, BROKEN BELIEF SYSTEMS

Broken Age: Act 2

***Broken Age: Act 1* ended with a twist, as the maiden-kidnapping monster that Vella aimed to take down and the spaceship on which Shay had lived his entire life were revealed to be one and the same.** *Act 2* continues in the same vein, playing on player assumptions as the two protagonists are thrown into each other's worlds.

As Vella explores the mix of advanced technology and coddling cuteness that make up Shay's home, she disrupts his world as the player knew it. Shay, too, discovers things that the player saw differently through Vella's eyes. While any twists delivered this way are smaller than that marking the end of *Act 1*, they're also less predictable. The straightforward swap does mean players who finished *Act 1* not too long before starting *Act 2* might feel cheated out of new environments, but the two colourful, hand-drawn worlds have gone through a few changes in the aftermath of *Act 1*'s conclusion. Some characters have moved, too, with some even coming together who have never met before.

It's also interesting to see each world through the eyes of the other's former inhabitant, and meet the quirky characters as if for the second time. Shay is thrilled to see real, non-yarn animals, and while he's reluctant to reveal too much about himself to Vella's acquaintances, the player still gets the benefit of seeing them in the next stage of their lives. As for Vella, her inability to decide whether to treat Mog Chothra as a monster or machine provides the kind of gentle humour that *Act 1* already established as the tone for the game. She also learns more about Shay, discovering him – as the player well knows – to be a spoilt boy raised to believe he's the hero, a commentary on male entitlement that reflects her story of overcoming gender-based adversity.

It's a shame that Vella and Shay are separated once more, but it makes sense mechanically: again, players control one character at a time, able to switch between them at any point. Unlike in *Act 1*, however, for which you could play one character's story to completion before starting the other, some of the puzzles in *Act 2* actually require you to switch between the two to find a solution, which muddies the waters.

Most of the puzzles in *Act 2* are as straightforward as those from *Act 1*: chains

DETAILS

FORMAT: PC
ORIGIN: USA
PUBLISHER: Double Fine Productions
DEVELOPER: In-house
PRICE: £18.99 (for both acts)
RELEASE: Out now
PLAYERS: 1
MINIMUM SPEC: 1.7 GHz Dual Core, 2 GB RAM, 512 MB VRAM, DirectX Compatible Sound Card
ONLINE REVIEWED: N/A

VELLA LEARNS MORE ABOUT SHAY, FINDING HIM TO BE A SPOILT BOY RAISED TO BELIEVE HE'S THE HERO

FAQs

Q. IS IT ALL RECYCLED LOCATIONS?
Mostly, but not all. You'll get to see a few new places along the way.

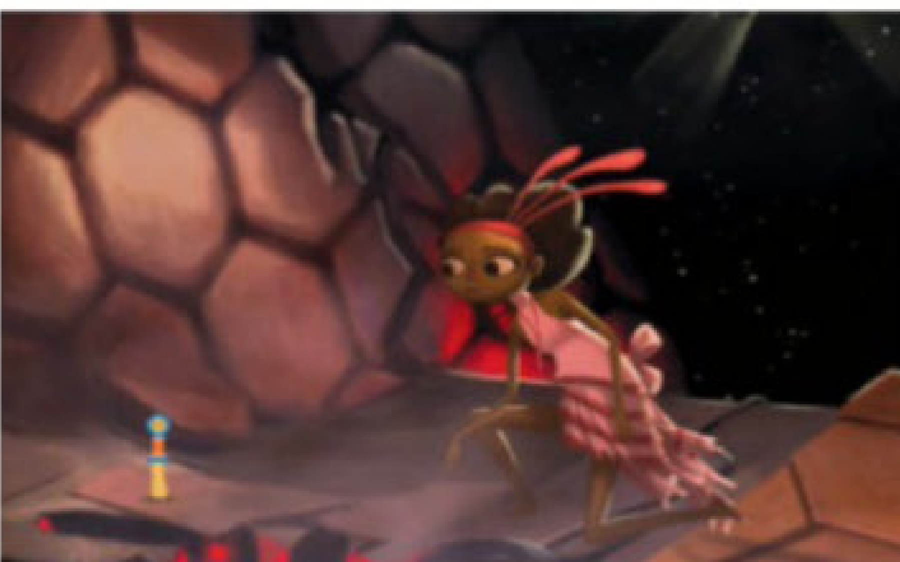
Q. IS IT MORE CHALLENGING?
Act 1 was pretty easy. *Act 2* does feature similarly straightforward puzzles, but throws in some harder ones too.

Q. WHO IS MAREK?
Well, that would be telling. *Act 2* might have a hollow ending, but it does answer a few questions throughout its course.

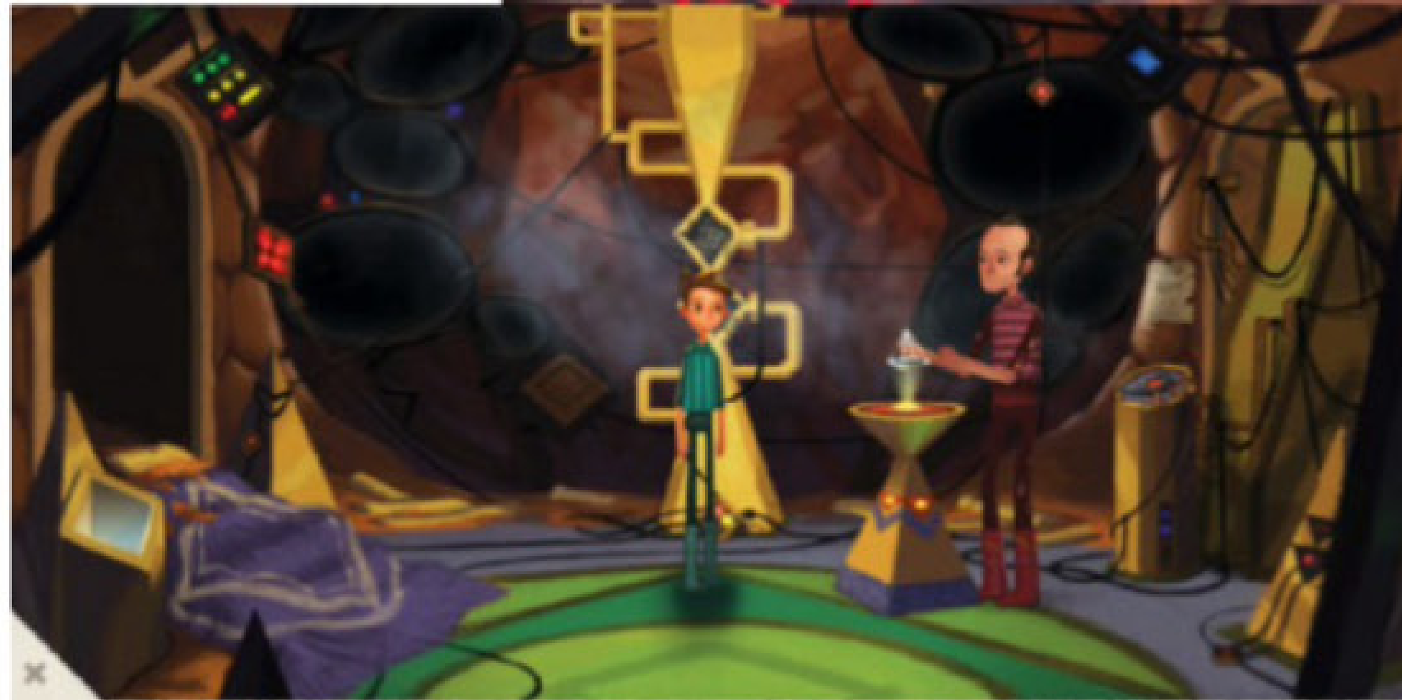




Below: After a literal lifetime on his ship, Shay is excited to find himself in a world populated by animals not made of yarn. As for the people, he's warier; he doesn't want them to know that his ship has spirited their friend Vella away.



Right: It's interesting seeing Vella and Shay interact with each other's acquaintances. Vella isn't as used to talking cutlery as Shay is.





Below: Alex's ship is shown to be primitive through its use of four-sided shapes everywhere rather than the hexagons Shay is used to.

of problems that you just need to solve in the right order, with no need to select a type of interaction, and important objects clearly signified and conveniently disposed of once used. Happily, *Act 2* also adds some more interesting kinds of puzzles to the mix, like logic puzzles that'll make players reach for a pen and paper. But those that require switching between Vella and Shay are messy.

For one, the lack of any need to switch between the two in *Act 1* means that players won't expect it in *Act 2*, and the game doesn't make the suggestion nearly clearly enough, sometimes even providing localised red herrings. One puzzle does have Shay wishing aloud that he was back on his ship where he could find the solution, but even that's misleading since the answer is hidden somewhere that wouldn't be particularly obvious to him.

These cross-modal puzzles often have too many possible answers to just try things until one works, but some can just be guessed without realising the solution was available to the other character. Perhaps the strangest thing about them is that they introduce the idea that the pair can pass solutions on to each other without actually communicating. The writing tries to laugh it off – "I have a good feeling about this. I don't know why," says Shay as he applies knowledge the player has gained through Vella – but it still feels odd.

Generally, the game has an issue with consistency in its communication. Some puzzles make you feel like you were only just smart enough to solve them, but for others the answer is obvious in the dialogue or item description. And when so much of what the characters say is designed to lead you down the right path, it might sound clever to have a puzzle where you instead need to continually ignore what the protagonist is suggesting but it's really just annoying. These moments stand out all the more because most of the game is good: gently funny, well written, well acted, lovely to look at, engaging and satisfying. *Act 2* builds on *Act 1* both narratively and mechanically, and, occasional mishaps aside, for most of the way through seems like it'll be a strong conclusion to the game.

Unfortunately, the conclusion to the conclusion dilutes the mix. After a few hours of puzzle solving in each other's worlds, Vella and Shay will both reach a point that clearly marks the move into a finale, and once that happens the game seems to lose steam. There are more problems to solve, but the environment is limited, the puzzles less interesting and not so well designed. The solutions require repetitious actions, especially if – as is likely – you don't pick up on what you're supposed to do straight away. What should be a fast-paced, exciting scene feels messy, and a little rushed.

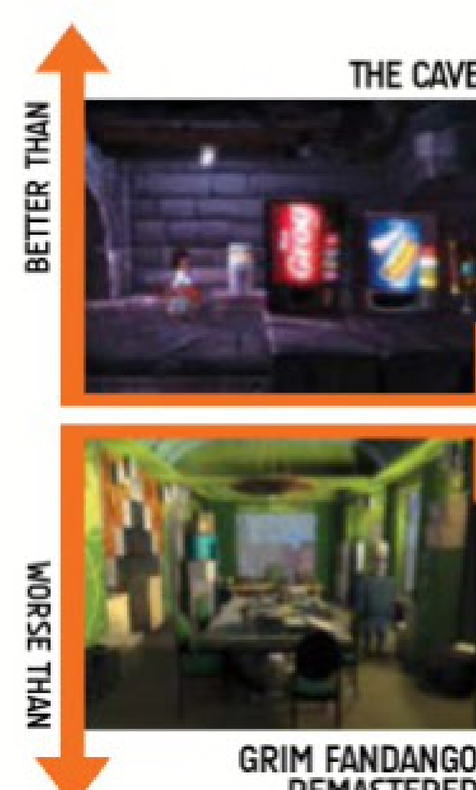
That feeling applies to the narrative, too. Some expectations are inevitably met as the game ends, but questions are left unanswered. The overarching plot that provided the basis for the delightful twists doesn't really go anywhere, and the focus is left on the characters. It's anticlimactic, but perhaps intentionally so. After all, it's the journey that counts, and both Vella and Shay have come a long way from where they started. Double Fine has proven its honed and tested skills in this genre again, but we can't help but feel that there was more it could do.

ENHANCED
IMPROVING ON THE ORIGINAL

DEEP THOUGHT: *Act 2* features new kinds of puzzles that involve more than combining objects until something sticks, such as answering multiple-choice questions through examination and deduction.

PART OF YOUR WORLD

Act 2 sees Vella and Shay each exploring the world previously occupied by the other. For Vella, that means discovering the extent of the damage done to the ship she thought was a monster, meeting various yarn creatures and other inhabitants, and getting to know more about Shay. Back in Shellmound and Meriloft, the end of *Act 1* has caused a few changes, with Vella's family come looking for her. It's interesting to see the protagonists tackle each other's worlds. Vella is friendly but suspicious, and Shay doesn't want to tell anyone that he knows where Vella is.



VERDICT
GOOD BUT INCONSISTENT, WITH AN ANTICLIMACTIC END

7
gamesTMmag scored **7** for
Broken Age 2
Follow our scores on JUST A SCORE

THE NORTH WILL NEVER FORGET

Game Of Thrones, Episode 2: The Lost Lords

DETAILS

FORMAT: PS4
OTHER FORMATS: Xbox One, PC, Xbox 360, PS3, Mac, iOS
ORIGIN: USA
PUBLISHER: Telltale Games
DEVELOPER: In-house
PRICE: £4 **RELEASE:** Out now
PLAYERS: 1

BETTER THAN
TALES FROM THE BORDERLANDS, EPISODE 1





AS GOOD AS
GAME OF THRONES, EPISODE 1

By the time this issue will be on the shelves, we'll be knee deep in season five of *Game Of Thrones*' televisual saga, and the games will have lost their function as a stop-gap, bridging the main series together. Interestingly enough, we think this actually helps the games stand alone – having the shows act as refreshers for the games, we're sure, is not how Telltale would have liked the balance to evolve, but for us, it has. It's a testament to how authentic an experience the Telltale games are that they feel so neatly woven into the fabric of *Game Of Thrones* wider universe. These games, despite relying on a new house that's never even mentioned in the show (but alluded to in the books) could be canon, so delicately are they poised within the larger fiction of George R. R. Martin's fantasy opus.

The second episode isn't as full of surprises and bloody consequence as the first instalment was, but it's functional to say the least – giving you more opportunity to dig into the values and hierarchy of the stoic Forrester family. We'd equate *The Lost Lords* to a mid-season TV episode not necessarily padded with filler, but lacking that killer hook of the season's intro.

Usual Telltale problems abound, too; the watercolour effect on the graphics can't disguise some occasionally terrible tearing, and the fact a narrative-driven game like this suffers from audio pop-in is massively immersion-breaking. Still, this isn't a badly-spun tale by any stretch, and it's a perfectly bearable stop-gap before you get to episode three… and that is where Telltale's *Game Of Thrones* gets interesting…

VERDICT
THE NECESSARY CALM BEFORE THE STORM

gamesTMmag scored **6** for
Game Of Thrones, Episode 2: The Lost Lords
6
Follow our scores on JUST A SCORE

Below: The introduction of new characters help you empathise with the existing cast whilst providing handy exposition dumps whenever necessary.







A DANCE WITH DRAGONS

Game Of Thrones, Episode 3: The Sword in the Darkness

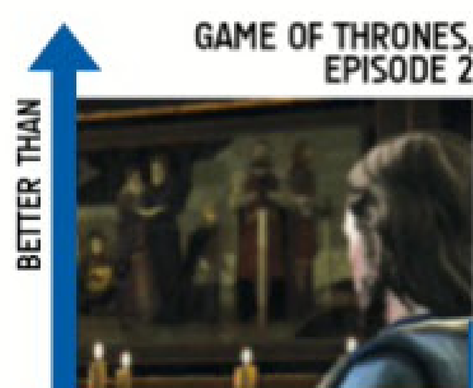
We've been fairly vocal critics of the art style Telltale opted for with the *Game Of Thrones* series… but we're willing to take it all back for this episode. Yes, sometimes the character's expressions are unintentionally comical when they're supposed to be wholly serious, and there is sometimes this wishy-washy effect to disguise that certain assets haven't loaded yet… but once we saw a dragon rendered in that style, we'll admit we were swayed.

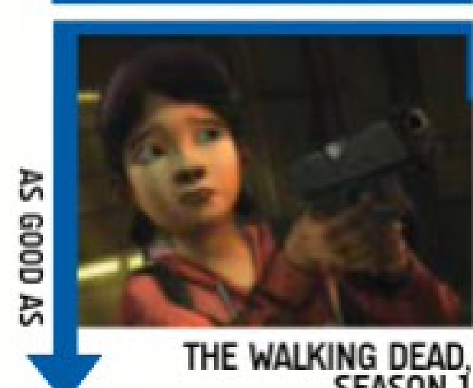
Without giving too much away, you meet a dragon – one of Daenerys' spawn, no less – in the very early stages of the episode, and it's one of the most tense encounters we've had in a Telltale game since the infamous final beat of *The Walking Dead* series. When the beast unfurled itself and stood above us in a cave, we realised why we'd kept on playing this series, when at times it felt like it was actively trying to make us stop – like the source material, Telltale's effort has these watermark moments that, every now and then, reveal the true beauty of interactive fiction.

DETAILS

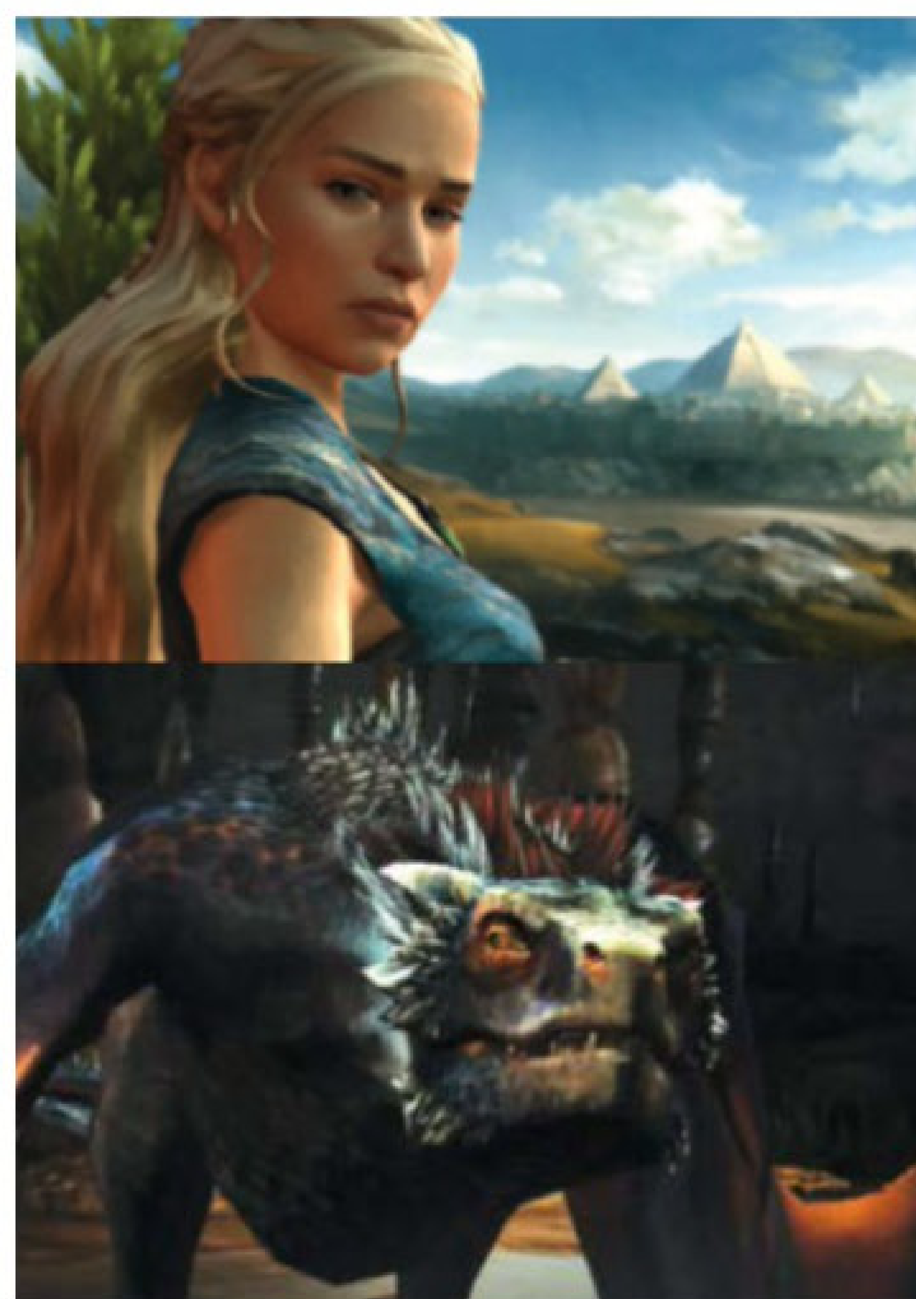
FORMAT: PS4
OTHER FORMATS: Xbox One, PC, Xbox 360, PS3, Mac, iOS
ORIGIN: USA
PUBLISHER: Telltale Games
DEVELOPER: In-house
PRICE: £4 / Season Pass £12
RELEASE: Out now
PLAYERS: 1

BETTER THAN
GAME OF THRONES, EPISODE 2





AS GOOD AS
THE WALKING DEAD, SEASON 1



Above: Weirdly enough, the dragon looks a lot better in action… don't judge us, but we chose to fend it off…

Aside from that, there are some more tough decisions to be made – from Mire Forrester in King's Landing to the newly dubbed Lord of the House back home, there are tough decisions to be made all round. Better yet, you actually *feel* like you're playing the politics game as Mira, and you actually *feel* like you're grasping for straws against the Whitehills back up North. And that's before you get to the ball of chaos that is the spurned child Asher over on Eastos… This was the episode that made us fall back in love with Telltale: you can see it hasn't lost its edge working with IP it doesn't control. If anything, that restriction just makes its games better.

VERDICT
BEAUTIFULLY EXECUTED

gamesTMmag scored **8** for
Game Of Thrones, Episode 3: The Sword in the Darkness
8
Follow our scores on JUST A SCORE

YOU BRING THE STRATEGY, I'LL BRING THE STEAM

Code Name: STEAM

DETAILS

FORMAT: 3DS
ORIGIN: Japan
PUBLISHER: Nintendo
DEVELOPER: Intelligent Systems
PRICE: £34.99
RELEASE: 15 May (US: 13 March)
PLAYERS: 1-2 (1-2 Online)
ONLINE REVIEWED: No

If you've ever imagined what it would be like if recurring Lovecraft character Randolph Carter, the Tin Man from *The Wizard Of Oz* and Tom Sawyer teamed up to stop aliens taking over a steampunk version of Earth, *Code Name: STEAM* makes your bizarrely specific dreams come true.

Fire Emblem and *Advance Wars* studio Intelligent Systems has come up with a plot as eccentric as the above example suggests. STEAM is a strike force, led by Abraham Lincoln, consisting of various characters from mythology and literature. Starting in London and later travelling to Boston, the White House and other curious locations, it's up to STEAM to find the source of the alien threat and defeat it. They do this via a number of turn-based strategic battles, each presented to the player from a third-person perspective instead of the usual bird's-eye viewpoint provided in the likes of *Fire Emblem*. The result is what *Gears Of War* would feel like were its protagonists significantly more patient in their approach.

Every character's actions in a turn, be that movement or weapon use, are limited by the amount of steam in their tank. Since map exploration is one of *Code Name: STEAM*'s central mechanics (there's no way to see an overview of the whole stage: you're limited to what your characters can see), you're able to move forward during a turn to scope out what's ahead, then move backwards to replenish the steam you just spent doing so. Players can also save some steam and end their turn early to activate Overwatch, a feature that enables them to fire first, Greedo-style, at any alien who wanders within their line of sight during the enemy's turn.

Enemies can also activate Overwatch, though, leading to numerous frustrating moments where you'll be surveying a new area and will suddenly walk in front of an alien you had no way of seeing, who then proceeds to use Overwatch to pump you full of lead (well, steam) before you have a chance to react. For a while, then, there's a certain amount of trial and error to proceedings. In time you learn to approach each uncharted area with a greater degree of caution, and also learn the different types of enemies in

Right: If you can't really wait for the upcoming *Fire Emblem If*, buy all four *Fire Emblem* amiibo to fill your squad and pretend it's a spin-off.



Above: You'll find yourself in a number of surprising locations as the story progresses. One mission early in the game has you breaking into Buckingham Palace to rescue Queen Victoria.



WITH NO WAY OF SEEING ANYTHING OTHER THAN WHAT YOUR SQUAD MEMBERS SEE, ENEMY TURNS MERELY BECOME PATIENCE-TESTING EXERCISES



Above: Of the various groups in the STEAM squad, *The Wizard Of Oz* is represented most with a third of the playable roster taken from it. They've been given redesigns though, as you can see by the Scarecrow's pumpkin-headed appearance.



MARTH ATTACKS

Code Name: STEAM features support for Nintendo's amiibo NFC figures, specifically the four characters from Intelligent Systems' other series, *Fire Emblem*. Scanning the Marth, Ike, Lucina or Robin figures adds them to your squad for the next stage and will need to be rescanned every time you want to use them. In keeping with their previous incarnations, each character acts like they do in *Fire Emblem*: Marth specialises in up-close combat with his sword, for example, while Robin uses his magic book to cast spells from a distance. As another nod to *Fire Emblem* however, if any of them die during a battle they can't be revived on the fly like other characters can; they're out until the level ends.



each stage (some act on sight, while others are blind and react to the sounds you make instead). With practice, those annoying and seemingly unfair moments become less frequent. The same can't be said for the countless infuriating waits you have to sit through when the enemy's taking their turn. After all your characters have made their moves you're stuck staring at an 'Alien Movement' message for what feels like an eternity while each of your enemies shuffles around the map.

Naturally, this concept isn't anything new to the turn-based strategy genre, and in Intelligent Systems' other games it could be argued that sitting through the enemy turn is almost as important as executing your own as the decisions they make will affect your plans. Here, however, this argument is invalid: with no way of seeing a general top-down view of the map and the game's founding principle being that the player can only see what their squad members see, enemy turns merely become patience-testing exercises. After all, common sense dictates that it would be wise ending your turn behind cover to prevent the enemy attacking, meaning you'll more often than not be spending up to 60 seconds literally staring at a brick wall while you hear enemies shuffling around in the background.

FAQs

Q. ABRAHAM LINCOLN? REALLY?
Yup, he's the head of the STEAM squad. Sadly, he isn't one of the twelve possible squad members in the game.

Q. HOW'S THE VOICE ACTING?
Surprisingly high-profile. Wil Wheaton and *Firefly*'s Adam Baldwin play the lead roles of Lincoln and Henry Fleming.

Q. ANY HIDDEN EXTRAS?
Beat the game to unlock a secret thirteenth character. We aren't spoiling who it is, mind you.



Thankfully, salvation is on the way. Nintendo announced in a recent Nintendo Direct broadcast that a patch was coming to the game that would enable players to speed up enemy turns by 2x or (if using a New 3DS) 3x, something that will make playing the game a far more attractive prospect. And it deserves to be, because there's a lot of depth to this game that many will miss out on if the annoying long breaks in gameplay put them off. As the story progresses, more characters join the STEAM team, each playing noticeably different to the others and offering new tactical possibilities. The option to replay any stage again with any four squad members encourages you to go back and rethink each level with the new characters you unlock.

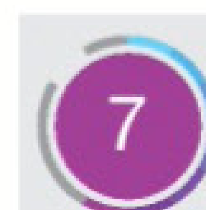
On stages with high balconies, do you head to the higher ground and have American folklore hero John Henry fire grenades down to the enemies below? Or do you decide to get stuck in with the Lion from *The Wizard Of Oz* – using his powerful leap attack to land on enemies – while Tiger Lily from *Peter Pan* remains on the balcony, firing her Medi-Mortar health shells at him to keep his life meter topped up? The number of possible combinations increases further with amiibo support, letting players bring *Fire Emblem* characters into the mix.

Code Name: STEAM is by no means Intelligent Systems' best game – far from it – but as a new IP it's got a number of interesting ideas. Its numerous annoyances prevent it from enjoying 'must-have' status but if Nintendo's promised patch eliminates its most irritating one, it could be great rather than merely good like it is now. The story and cast are absurd enough to make us want this game to succeed, if only to see what Intelligent Systems can do with future instalments. For now though, as long as you're a patient gamer you'll be rewarded with a satisfying strategy game that has its fair share of niggles but should still keep you compelled for twenty to thirty hours.

CONNECTED
EXPANDING THE GAMEPLAY

MULTIPLAYER: The best of the two-player online modes on offer are standard deathmatch fights and Medal Mode, in which players fight while trying to collect medals scattered throughout the stage.

VERDICT
NOT WITHOUT ITS ISSUES BUT A STRONG EFFORT



gamesTMmag scored 7 for
Code Name: STEAM
Follow our scores on JUST A SCORE



Above: There's a lot of repetition to be found in the buildings that appear from your zoned areas, but modders have created extras that you can add into your world.

BUILD IT AND THEY WILL COME

Cities: Skylines

It's not all that fair to lavish too much hatred on the last *SimCity*. Mired as it was by a PR disaster that'll feature in history books and ultimately leading to the closure of a beloved studio, it'd feel wrong to hate it too much. Especially since it was actually a pretty good evolution of the franchise – underneath that unnecessary furore – that offered that same micro-compulsion that such games rely on. It was just a shame that those inherent design decisions had proven so critically restrictive to the game – it was a burst of fun, but had little in the way of longevity. Enter *Cities: Skylines*; this is a title that would not have happened had Maxis and EA not royally ruined the franchise, and it really shows.

Many of the design concepts have carried over from the previous iteration of *SimCity*, such as the 'Agent' system – whereby each citizen is a 'real' person inside your simulated landscape – the reliance on roads to place structures onto and even a very familiar method of constructing the roads themselves. To anyone paying attention, it'd be fair to say that at times *Cities: Skylines* draws a little *too* much inspiration from the game that would be king.

Crucially, however, *Cities: Skylines* uses these systems much better and in a much less confining manner. You begin – as these games so commonly do – with a blank plot of land to gradually grow and cultivate into a thriving metropolis. It's much slower going, however, providing that same incremental tweak-and-addition gameplay that makes the genre so appealing; just at a much slower pace. For a great deal of time you'll be stuck with suburbia, rather than jumping road tool first into six-lane highways and office blocks. This shouldn't be confused with tedium, however; there are always enough demands or problems to solve that you'll quite gladly click away at your burgeoning town until you unlock greater options. It's a staged process, with periodic population milestones garnering new buildings to play around with, services to try out or policies to enact.

It's a surprisingly considered setup that means early on you've always got something to strive for. At later stages it rightly becomes less about these rewards and more about your own personal satisfaction. Knowing that you can better manage the zoning to reduce noise pollution for your residential areas, for example, will be enough of a reason to spend

DETAILS

FORMAT: PC
ORIGIN: Finland
PUBLISHER: Paradox Interactive
DEVELOPER: Colossal Order
PRICE: £22.99
RELEASE: Out now
PLAYERS: 1
MINIMUM SPEC: 3.2 GHz CPU, 4GB RAM, 512MB GPU, 4GB HDD space
ONLINE REVIEWED: N/A

IT'LL EAT AT YOUR EVERY WAKING THOUGHT AS YOU TRY AND FIGURE OUT THE IDEAL TRANSPORT SYSTEM

FAQs

Q. JUST GRID-BASED CITIES?

If you want to maximise population per square mile, that's an option – but you can make use of freeform road tools too.

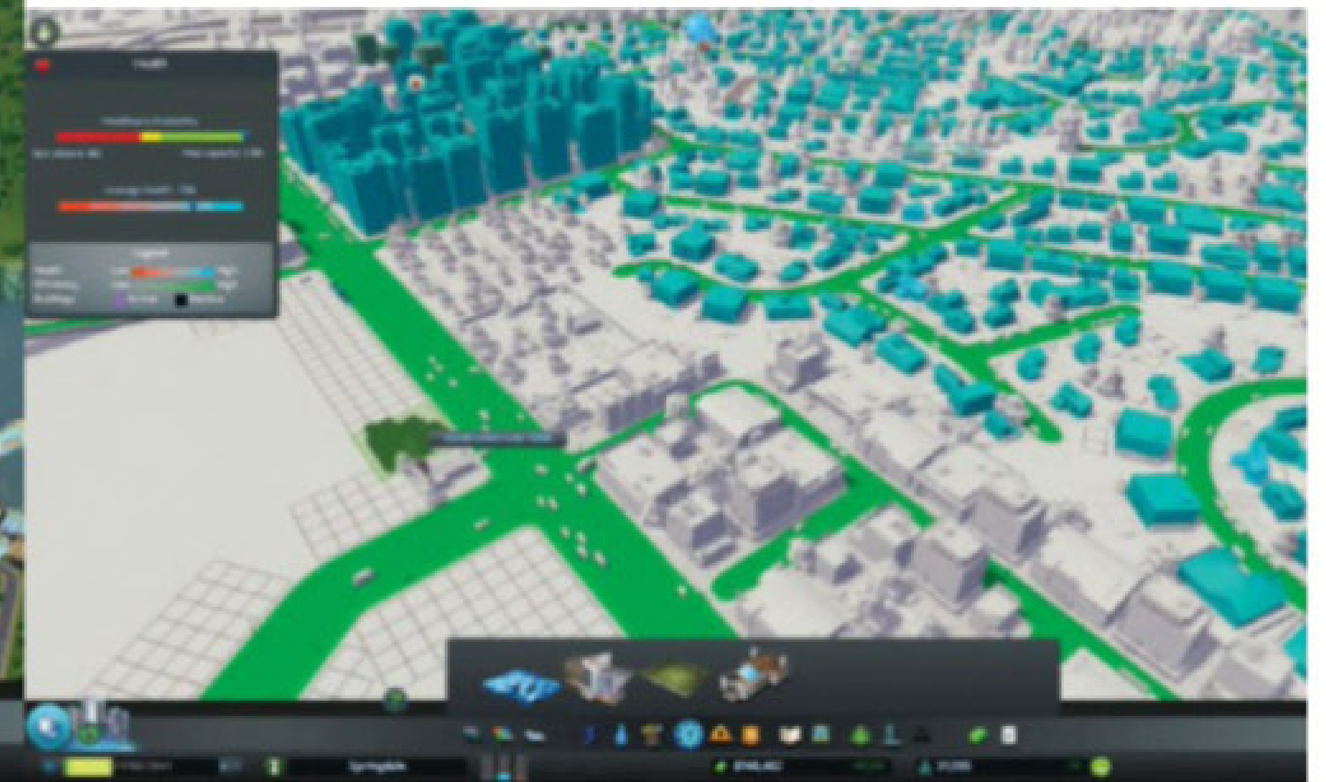
Q. IS THE TRAFFIC REALLY THAT BAD?

As with any real-life city, traffic is a necessary evil – but issues in the way AI works means you'll need to plan your road layout smartly.

Q. AND HOW MANY MODS?

Already thousands, the majority being new structures. Mods will only continue to improve the game over time.

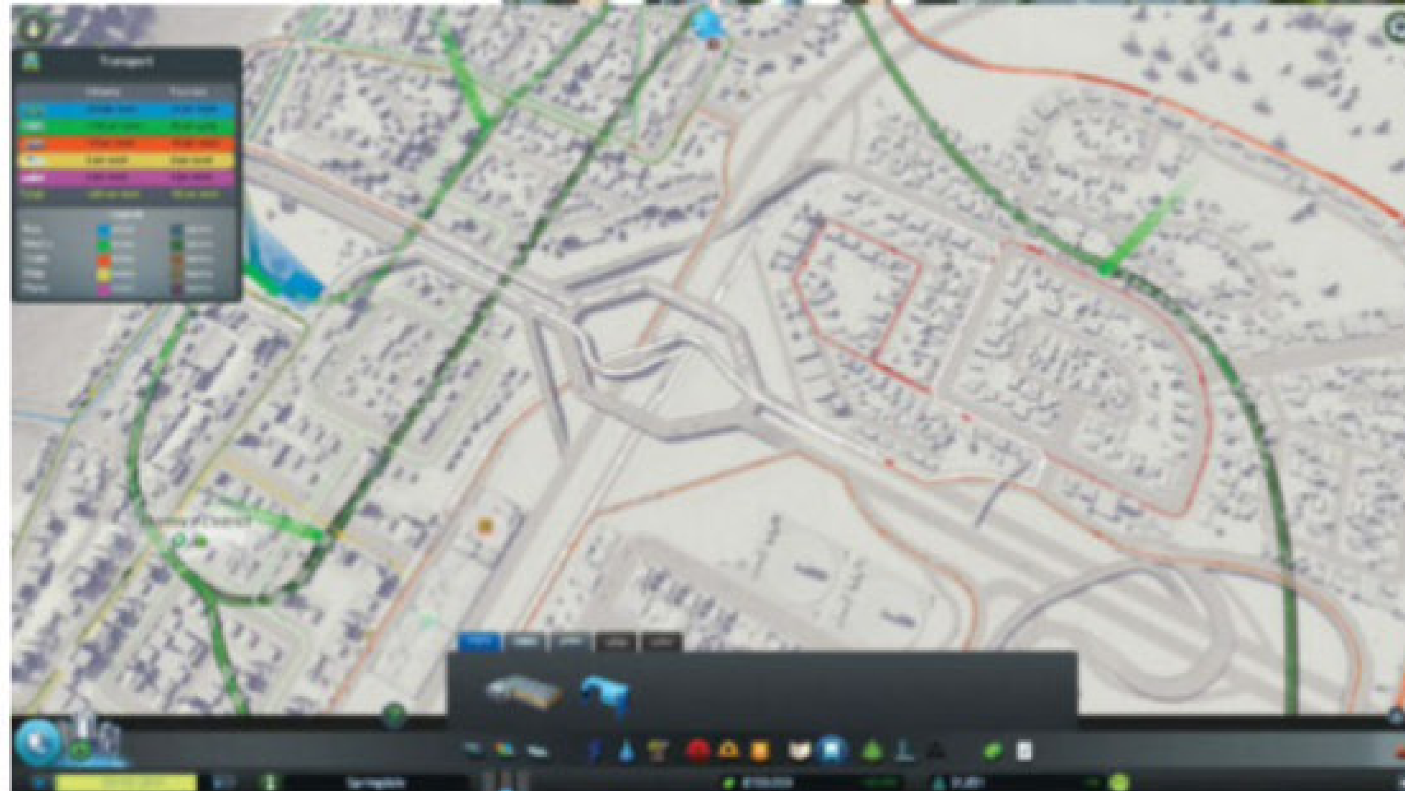




Left: There's a certain pride that comes from watching your city work, especially when you've been careful to manage one-way road systems and transport services. It's a sense of satisfaction that genre fans will love.



Below: Understanding how to create and manage transportation services will really help your city's growth, but here's a pro tip: use the bus stop tool to connect certain districts – such as residential and industrial – to find faults and flaws in the route travellers will take.





hours planning and executing the perfect city design. Or how that one poorly-designed road layout that always has cars piled up back-to-back will infuriate you so much that it'll eat at your every waking thought as you try and figure out the ideal transportation system. In essence, it is what a city simulation ought to be, giving you a sense of natural growth through gradual improvements.

With that said, it doesn't do everything right. As with most such games, the options for your services are limited and if you're the sort to eventually tire of city simulation games due to a sense of repetition then you'll likely suffer the same fate here. While there are enough options to provide for your city ably, there's simply such a lack of variety that it eventually becomes a checklist of mechanics, ensuring that each new area is covered by police and fire stations, a hospital and the necessary education, transportation and waste removal services to make sure everyone is catered for.

It's a problem inherent with the genre, one that can only be resolved through a much wider choice of buildings (often alongside greater complexity) or your own personal desire to design and improve your city. Traffic, too, can be a pain, but not because of its bothersome nature on the flow of your roads. There's an issue with the traffic AI that often has practically every car sitting in the right-hand lane (or left-hand, if you choose the British option), even when they may be continuing straight ahead. It's born of the AI's decision that – eventually – it wants to make that right-hand turn even if it isn't immediately, and will pick that lane when it'll be much easier and quicker to take another.

It's a frustrating problem because it doesn't account for any further consideration of the road infrastructure, like a SatNav sending you over road works. Once you understand the issue, it can be counteracted with the design of your roads – and in a way it *does* create a challenging puzzle to solve – but it is a problem all the same.

Therein lies the real success of *Cities: Skylines* though, and one of the key ways it has managed to draw in such a large number of adoring fans: mods. Already there are mods that allow you to toggle traffic lights and even affect right of way, as well as talented creators adding in extra buildings to provide answers to the game's otherwise lack of variety. There's an in-game asset editor too, allowing you to create with the game's objects, alter existing structures or even import 3D models of your own and then upload them to the Steam Workshop. Everything from UI improvements, beautification mods, new buildings and intersections, maps and more can and have been created for the game, improving any slight irritant and adding to the core tools that are already a stellar example of the genre.

It wouldn't be fair to praise a game for the effort of its devoted community working on improvements for free, but you only have to look at the diehard fans of *SimCity 4* and the ultimate demise of *SimCity 2013* to realise these games can *only* survive with the persistent love of its modding community. Ultimately *Cities: Skylines* has provided exactly what players wanted from *SimCity 2013*, and that ought to be all it takes to convince would-be city planners.

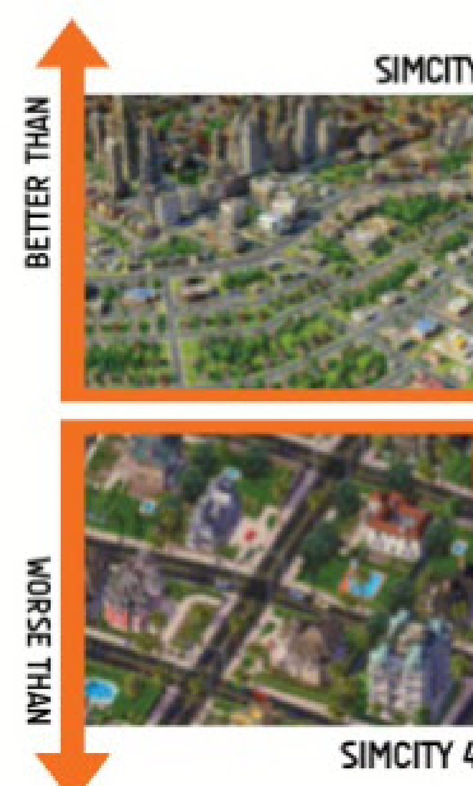
ENHANCED

IMPROVING ON THE ORIGINAL

LIKE WHAT YOU SEE: While not a sequel to SimCity, Cities: Skylines pays close attention to what the EA game did right and rectified practically everything it did wrong.

LAND FOR SALE

One of the biggest criticisms of the previous *SimCity* title was its lack of room. The speed with which you could fill each city's plot of land stifled any longevity the game might've otherwise warranted. Not only does it take much longer to fill the same amount of space in your starting lot in *Cities: Skylines*, but you can also purchase adjacent tiles of the same size, up to nine in total in fact. This alone will give you space to expand into, even before you consider the mods to allow the purchase of all 16 tiles of a map (though you'll need a beast of a PC to run it).

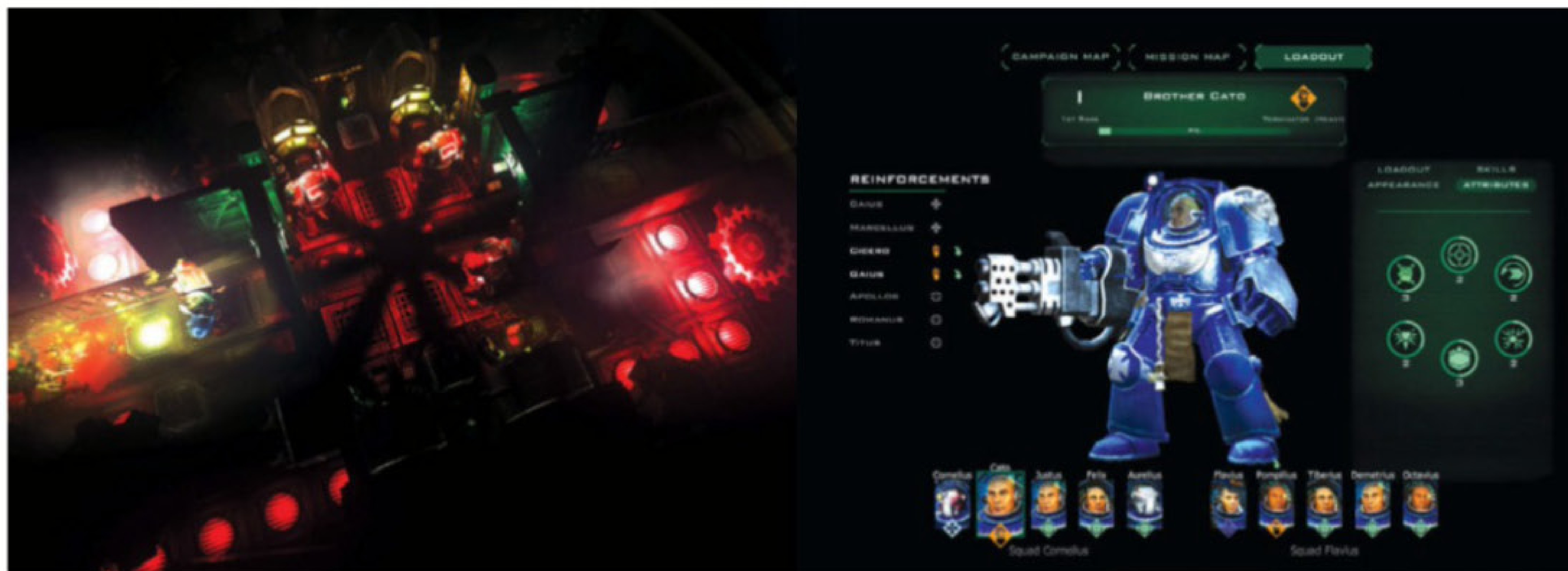


VERDICT

WELL-BUILT AND CONSIDERED – MODS WILL KEEP THIS ONE GOING

gamesTMmag scored **9** for Cities: Skylines

9



Left: One thing *Ascension* gets right is having decent character progression and customisation for your characters. Level up, choose the right skills and attributes, and have a strong load-out and your Marines will prove pretty darn powerful.

HULK SMASH PUNY STRATEGY GAME

Space Hulk: Ascension

It's not usually a good sign when a game is revamped from the ground up after release, yet that's what happened with *Space Hulk*. Originally released sans subtitle in August 2013, *Ascension* followed in November 2014. While this edition and its subsequent DLC drops are an improvement, overall it's still a rote, frustrating experience.

From the off, *Ascension* commits the worst sin a strategy game can - it's maddeningly unclear, making strategic play more of a crapshoot than a reasoned evaluation of units and resources. Just getting through the tutorial is an exercise in frustration, the hints provided having little to no relevance to what your characters do. Reckon you can just dive into the core game? Think again - there's so much going on you're soon overwhelmed.

The problem isn't that the game is difficult, but that it doesn't give you the tools necessary to overcome that difficulty. The UI borders are microscopic even when zoomed in, giving only the tiniest icons to select attacks, movements, or tactics from, while the 'fog of war' practically extends right to your Space Marine's armour. It's clearly meant to create an oppressive, tense mood as you explore the colossal space wrecks of the title, but instead it's like being double blind. The hostile welcome is particularly disappointing when the board game it's based on is arguably Games Workshop's most accessible title, even for those who don't play its miniatures games.

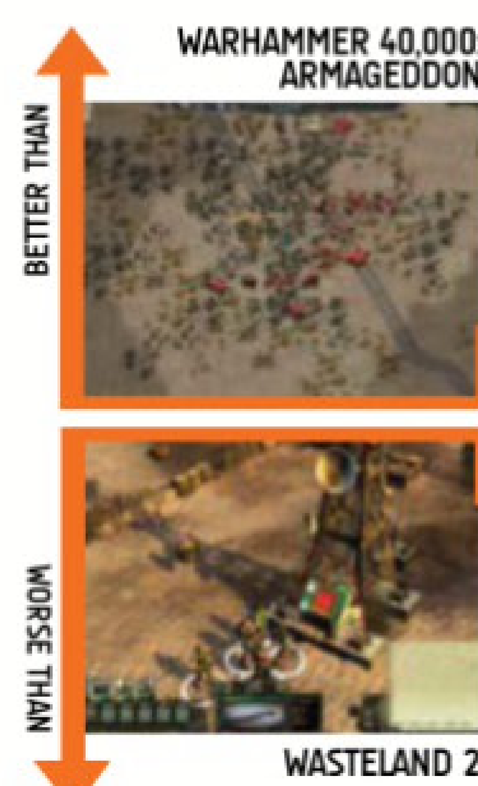
Then again, *Ascension* seems targeted at the fans most invested in the physical game. Unless you know your Ultramarines from your Blood Angels, or your Genestealers from your Orks, you'll be at a real loss. There's an expectation for players to already be invested in the universe. Sure, it's a licensed game that will understandably attract that core demo, but is that any reason to throw newcomers to the Space Wolves?

What's truly disappointing is that there are seeds of greatness here. Character units have solid customisation, allowing for individuality in your team make-up – and some of the more powerful attacks are even fun! There's an Imperial arsenal's worth of weapons, and over 100 missions with different tactics to (try to) explore depending on your faction. There's a huge volume of content here – it's just a tremendous shame that short of having the perseverance of Sisyphus, anyone but the most hardcore *Warhammer 40K* fans will be driven off by its impenetrability. This could have been so much more.

DETAILS

FORMAT: PC
ORIGIN: Denmark
PUBLISHER: Full Control Studios
DEVELOPER: In-House
PRICE: £22.99 (+ £16.21 for DLC)
RELEASE: Out Now
PLAYERS: 1
MINIMUM SPEC: Win 7/2 GHz Dual Core/2GB RAM/GeForce 400+, AMD Radeon 4000+/ DX9/15 GB HDD space
ONLINE REVIEWED: N/A

BETTER THAN: WARHAMMER 40,000: ARMAGEDDON



WORSE THAN: WASTELAND 2

ENHANCED

IMPROVING ON THE ORIGINAL

BONUS CONTENT: There's no denying this dramatically expands upon 2013's *Space Hulk*, with a horde of new missions, weapons and factions available to experiment with.

VERDICT

GREAT BUT ULTIMATELY SQUANDERED POTENTIAL

gamesTMmag scored 4 for Space Hulk: Ascension

4

Follow our scores on JUST A SCORE



Above: Believe it or not, this is a well lit shot of the game. Just look at it. Or don't, given you effectively can't. *Ascension* might gain a few points if only you could see what you're doing.

ANOTHER FAILED CONSOLE MMO EXPERIMENT

Dungeons & Dragons: Neverwinter

Starved for options, *Dungeons & Dragons: Neverwinter* is the best MMORPG available on Xbox One. Observed on its own, perhaps that statement showers more positivity on Cryptic's free-to-play dungeon crawler than it rightfully deserves. It's a fact that conceals a dirty truth that we hate to admit, but here goes: MMOs barely function on console. There are rare exceptions, but good MMOs are so far and few between that they sometimes feel like the fever dream of a controller-bound gamer. It was over a decade between *Phantasy Star Online* and *Final Fantasy XIV: A Realm Reborn* after all, the industry's two best examples of massively multiplayer competence, and everything else has been middling at best.

Despite having the best of intentions, *Neverwinter* is a game built around anaemic proficiency. There's a mess of currency options and character classes sat on the forefront of the experience. Despite offering lots of things for you to do and quests to steal away your attention and time, there's no escaping the realisation that pretty much all of it is boring. That isn't to say it's all bad. In fact, *Neverwinter* skirts very closely to the outer borders of boredom – threatening to make the leap to fun on more occasions than it rightfully should. It plays like a competent cross between an action-RPG and a traditional sword-and-sorcery MMORPG. The combat has all of the fast and frantic slashing, stabbing and sidestepping systems that would be commonly found in the former.

At it's best, *Neverwinter*'s combat offers moments of hack-and-slash entertainment. The convoluted character creation system ensures there's bound to be a class out there to suit your play style – even if you don't necessarily understand what you're building – whether you're looking to tank, DPS, heal or a wild mixture of the three. If Cryptic did anything right here to help strengthen the core combat mechanics, it's the unashamed lift of Square Enix's innovative Cross Hot Bar control system from the PlayStation versions of *A Realm Reborn*.

While the number of active abilities on offer is small, especially compared to, say, *World Of Warcraft* or *The Elder Scrolls Online*, it does mean that they are easily mapped to the Xbox One gamepad. It's easy enough to get your head around the basics, but the design lacks the simplicity or clarity of the Cross Hot Bar. Pressing the left or right trigger activates your 'At-Will' powers, while the rest of your commands are crammed onto the face buttons. For melee characters, it isn't as taxing on your fingers, but we found magic wielders were harder to control in tight situations. This wouldn't have been a problem on PC, where a mouse and keyboard offers as many hotkeys as your mind can possibly imagine, but console owners just don't have that luxury, the result is that the cluttered controller can at times feel like a distraction.

DETAILS

FORMAT: Xbox One
OTHER FORMATS: PC
ORIGIN: USA
PUBLISHER: Perfect World
DEVELOPER: Cryptic
PRICE: £Free
RELEASE: Out Now
PLAYERS: Massively Multiplayer
ONLINE REVIEWED: Yes



Below: *Neverwinter* features a diverse range of classes and playstyles to choose between, though it'll take a lot of testing to find one that you want to invest in.







Right: Cryptic opted to launch *Neverwinter* as a free-to-play game and, thankfully, the monitisation systems aren't nearly as obtrusive as you might expect. It's possible to happily play to cap without needing to spend any money.

DESPITE HAVING THE BEST OF INTENTIONS, NEVERWINTER IS A GAME BUILT AROUND ANAEMIC PROFICIENCY



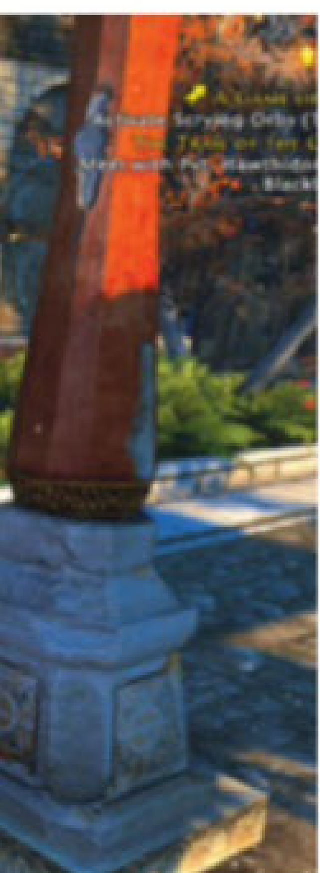


FAQs

Q. IS IT FREE-TO-PLAY?
As long as you don't mind a little grind, you'll be able to get everything you need in-game.

Q. SHOULD I BOTHER?
If you're desperate for something to play, but can't wait for *TESO*, go for it.

Q. WHY DOES IT LOOK LIKE A YEAR ONE XBOX 360 GAME?
We simply can't answer that for you. Some of the vistas look nice, but most areas are rather drab.



THE LONELY ROAD

Game chat is both a blessing and a curse in traditional MMOs. It's where friendships can be forged and where trolls can make you feel like dirt, and so the silence in *Neverwinter* is both refreshing and disturbing. Most players can't be bothered to use the unintuitive in-game text chat function with their gamepad, while there seems to be no sign of anybody using a USB keyboard or the SmartGlass app as an alternative. It's all very quiet and it sucks some of the life out of questing with randoms. It makes *Neverwinter* feel like a mediocre single-player game at times. MMOs are founded on communities, and *Neverwinter* doesn't have one, which could spell disaster once *The Elder Scrolls Online* leeches a lot of the players.



Then again, a distraction from *Neverwinter*'s grinding mediocrity is welcomed every now and again. Never have the Forgotten Realms been quite so forgettable. *Neverwinter* wastes its lore-heavy *Dungeons & Dragons* heritage with a repetitive and mundane quest that only occasionally grabs your attention because of the god-awful voice acting.

At times, *Neverwinter* even seems unimaginative on purpose. Kill X amount of enemies. Collect X amount of items. Look at X amount of objects. Return, rinse, repeat. *Neverwinter* doesn't even seem to mask its repetition. The same boss template is used over and over, relegating even the toughest fights to muscle memory. That magic trail leads you on to pretty much everything you'll ever need in *Neverwinter*. The lack of variety here makes the exclusion of The Foundry, *Neverwinter*'s rather entertaining content creator found in the PC version, all the more baffling. The player-created quests were among the best to be found in *Neverwinter*. Being stuck with *Neverwinter*'s vanilla campaign feels like we are being punished, especially considering we've already taken characters to the level 60 cap through that better experience on PC two years ago.

Frustratingly, even if you try to look past the mundane questing, there's a surprising lack of open areas to explore, especially in the first twenty or so hours of your adventure. Not that *Neverwinter* can handle larger areas or wider vistas, mind. By the time you begin to reach more detailed areas, such as Icespire Peak, you'll begin to encounter a wildly unstable frame rate. The environmental detail, spell and weather effects would often cause the Xbox One version's frame-rate to crawl. This is a distracting annoyance in the crowds of NPCs and silence of *Neverwinter*'s hub zones. It's an enjoyment-destroying crutch when it begins affecting combat.

Neverwinter distills the MMORPG adventure to a laundry list of tasks. True, most MMOs do this – but the skill in design for these genre games is how well the repetition is masked. The likes of *World Of Warcraft*'s *Warlords Of Draenor*, *The Elder Scrolls Online* and even *Final Fantasy XIV: A Realm Reborn* have done so much to make questing fun and diverse in MMOs again, yet Cryptic's debut Xbox One game turns its back on this progress. *Neverwinter* might be competent, but it's rarely fun or interesting. Not a lot has changed since it first released on PC back in 2013 then.

SYNTHESIS

BRINGING GENRES TOGETHER

ACTION-MMO: *Neverwinter* combines the structure and pacing of an MMO, with a disappointingly loose action-RPG combat template. At times it even threatens to be fun.

VERDICT

BLAND AND GRINDY, IT'S TOUGH TO RECOMMEND

A PINT-SIZED SERVING OF HELL

Titan Souls

There was a boss in *Legend Of Zelda: A Link To The Past* so evil that it earned eternal infamy among *Zelda* fans; his name was Moldorm. One slip and, with a single hit, the agile giant worm would bash Link off the floating platform to the level below, instantly returning Link to square one. It was brutal. *Titan Souls* is basically 20 Moldorm fights in quick succession with one minor difference – you have absolutely zero health.

Titan Souls' top-down view and pixelated 16-bit art style instantly conjures up thoughts of classic *Zelda*. But in truth it draws far more parallels with acclaimed PS2 adventure *Shadow of the Colossus*.

You play a boy with a simple mission to defeat a series of bosses with a single weapon, a bow and arrow. Your past is a big a mystery as your motives. You set off into an open and picturesque world that, despite its rich visuals, serves as little more than a scenic trek to the next boss. Also like Team ICO's PS2 masterpiece, *Titan Souls*' gameplay is, at its core, gloriously straightforward. You can run, roll to dodge, fire an arrow and, via some mystery Jedi-like telekinetic power, draw the arrow back towards yourself for another shot.

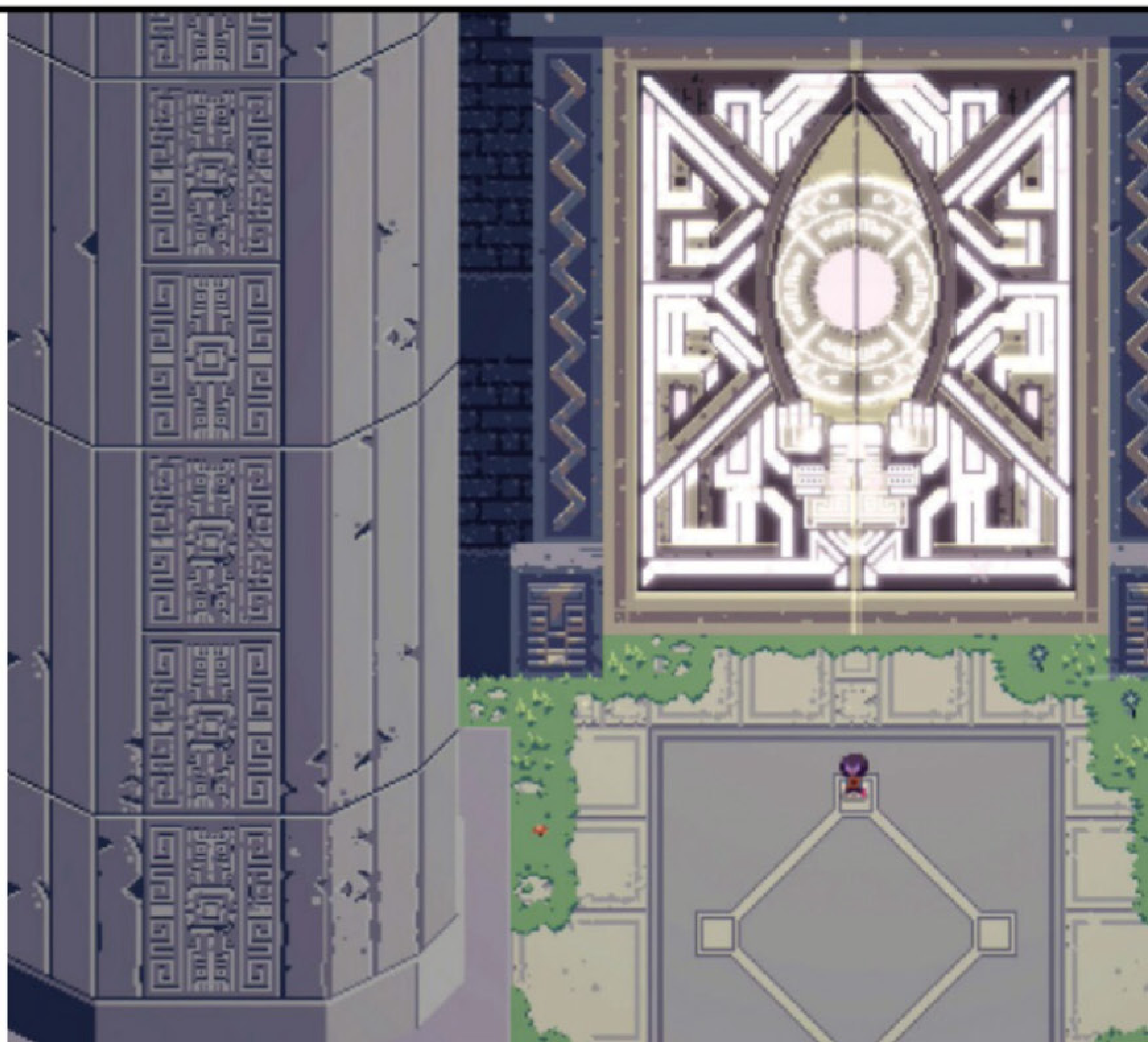
This simplicity is key, because the real depth is in figuring out how on earth you're supposed to beat the game's 20 hard-as-nails bosses. You will face all manner of wacky-looking beasts that unleash a merciless flurry of attacks the moment you enter their chambers and engage them. Instead of having to master a mass of complex controls and manoeuvres, you're faced with mastering the unique patterns of behaviour for each encounter.

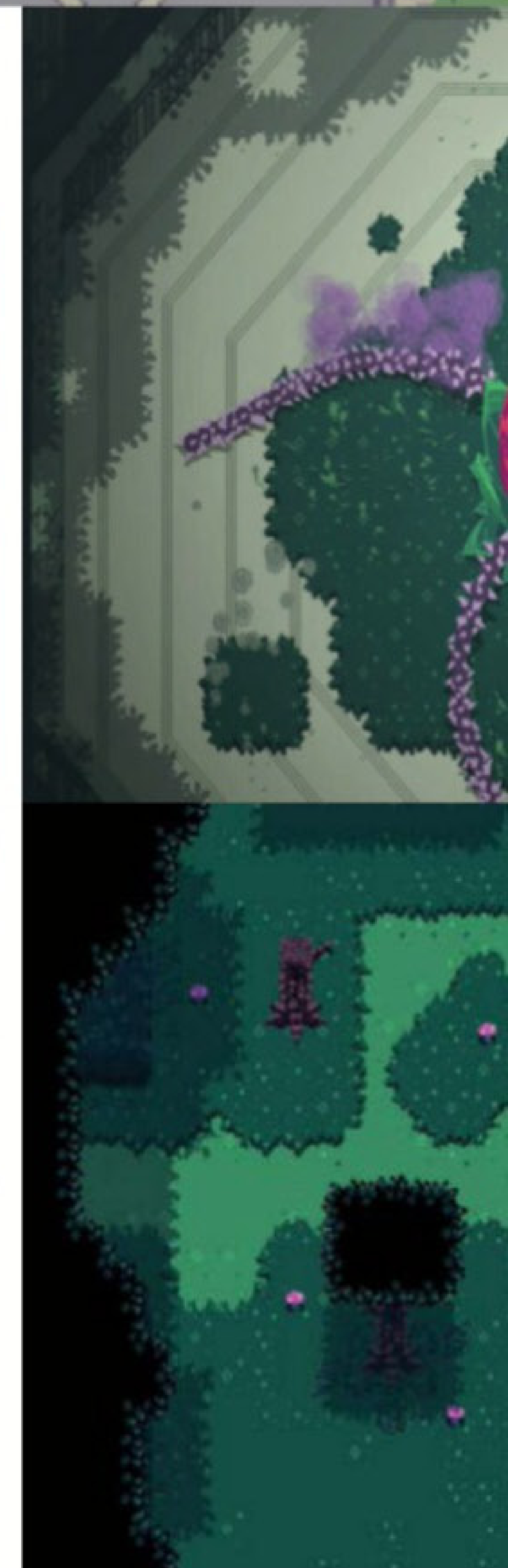
Every boss has a single weak spot and all you have to do to win is put an arrow into it. In some cases, the target spot is obvious, but the window within which to shoot it seems almost non-existent, requiring a lightning-quick trigger finger and pinpoint accuracy. Other cases require a bit of clever puzzle-solving, challenging you to carefully observe the boss and its environment, figure out how to expose its tender parts and then how to get an arrow into it.

Each boss is masterfully designed and no punches are pulled. This is hardcore difficulty at it's old-school best. The bosses are fast and cunning. Unlike the enemies of most modern games these bad boys are actually trying to kill you. And just to make things interesting there's

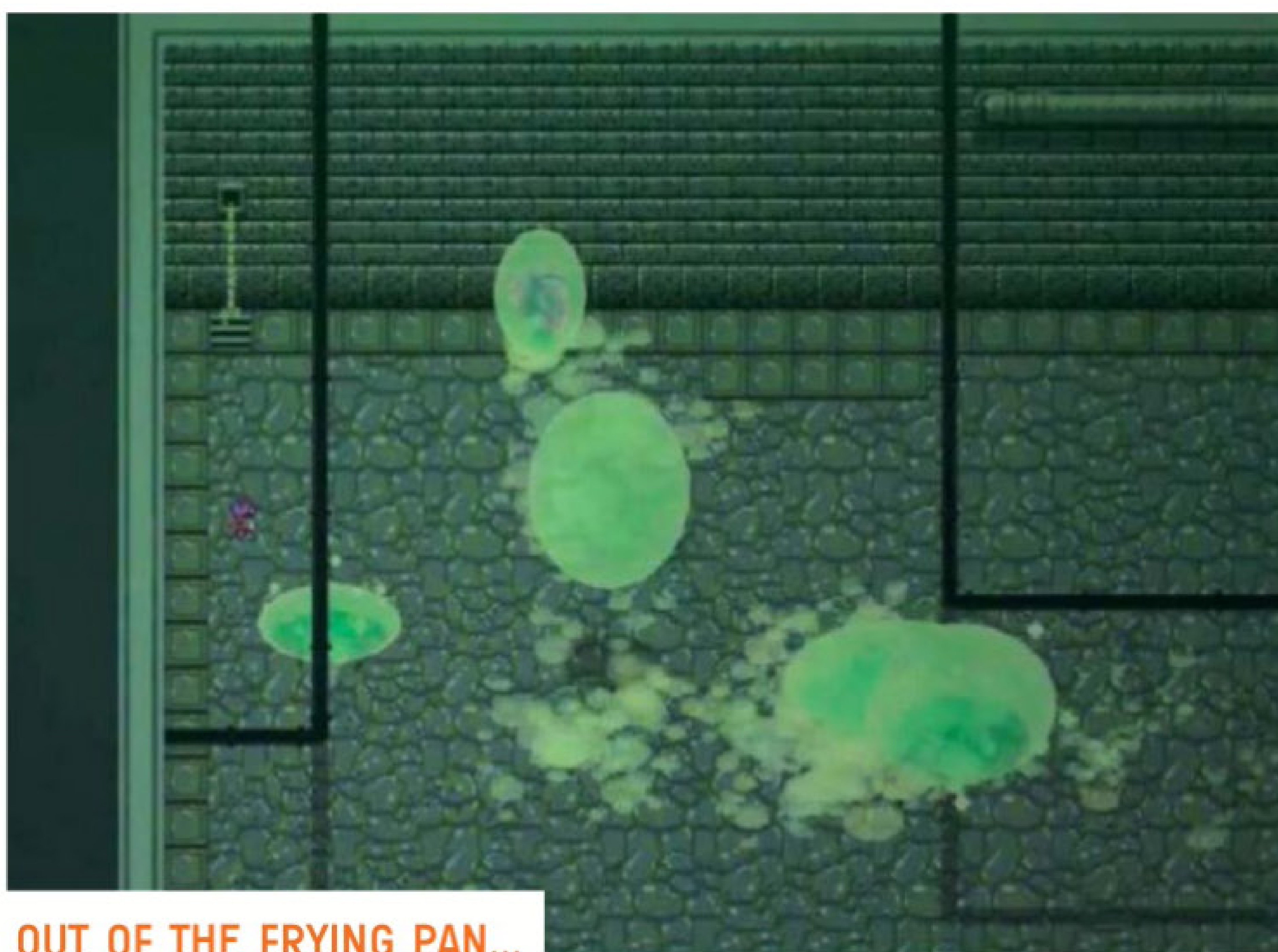
DETAILS

FORMAT: PC
OTHER FORMATS: PS4, Mac, PS Vita
ORIGIN: UK
PUBLISHER: Devolver Digital
DEVELOPER: Acid Nerve
PRICE: £10.99
RELEASE: Out Now
PLAYERS: 1
MINIMUM SPEC: OS: Windows Vista/7/8 Processor: 2.0 Ghz i5 or better Memory: 4 GB RAM Graphics: 1GB Video RAM DirectX: Version 10 Hard Drive: 400 MB available space Additional Notes: PlayStation 4 or Xbox 360 Gamepad Recommended
ONLINE REVIEWED: N/A





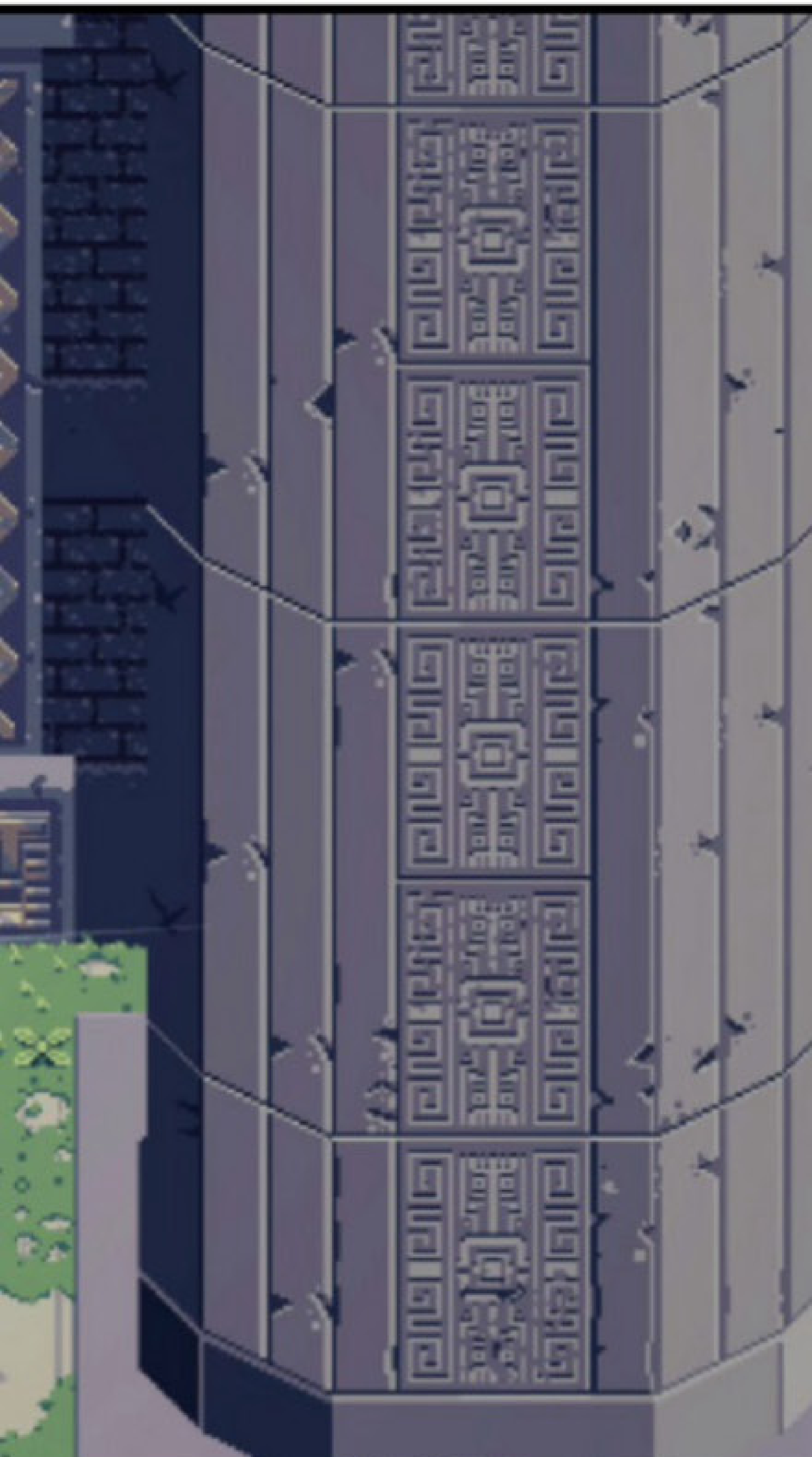
Above: After clearing the bosses in any given area you unlock a large ominous door to a new locale, and a whole new serving of death, swearing and controller slamming.
Right: Some bosses, like this flower, show no obvious signs of weakness. It'll take some cunning gaming logic and ninja-dodging skills to uncover their secrets and carry out a plan of attack.



OUT OF THE FRYING PAN...

There's a heart in the center of this seemingly tame blob, but when you shoot it the blob doesn't die – surely you can't expect it to be made that easy for you. It just splits in two, with the heart in one of its halves. This process continues as you split the blob into smaller and smaller individual chunks. Again, this is reminiscent of *Zelda* games – ChuChus, anyone?

As each blob bounces around the room they spread sticky goo around the floor that slows your step, and the smaller orbs can hop higher and farther. Which means that the closer you get to finally revealing the heart, the more likely you are to be killed by an agile mini-blob. Clever.







AS GOOD AS

TOWERFALL ASCENSION



WORSE THAN

SHADOW OF THE COLOSSUS

no such thing as health – the slightest slip and you're dead. And you will die. A lot.

Dying sends you back to the most recently encountered checkpoint – typically just a few seconds walk from the chamber in which you copped it, which can actually be infuriating considering the sheer frequency of your death. But you have unlimited lives – you just respawn and dash back in for another try. Think *Hotline Miami* without the guns and that snappy instant retry feature. *Titan Souls* is a game of trial and error (emphasis on the error). You rush in, you die. You take your time, you die. You camp in one spot, death. You roll around haphazardly, death. But then, after a dozen or so deaths and plenty of F-bombs, you notice something; a subtle pattern in the enemy's actions, or a specific angle from which, for a fraction of a second, you're able to sneak in a shot on the bullseye. It might take another dozen tries, but, eventually, you hit the spot.

Winning, as you can imagine, in *Titan Souls* feels absolutely glorious. There's a loud and distinctive 'smash' sound as the arrow strikes home and, suddenly, the music stops. Utter silence. The boss is frozen in its tracks and the screen goes black-and-white. You did it. You finally actually did it! Two minutes from now you'll be blasting expletives at the next boss loud enough to worry the neighbours, but for that brief moment you feel like a king. And no one can take that away from you. It's an emotional journey of glorious victory and frustrating failure, but despite its difficulty, your time with the game is likely to be almost as fleeting as your victory celebrations. We managed to see the ending within a single five-or-so-hour sitting.

MISSING LINK

WHAT WE WOULD CHANGE

POWER-UP: Simple player upgrades, like gaining the ability to run slightly faster, would have added depth.
BARON LANDS: While there are hints of Zelda puzzles, we'd want more to do in the overworld.

For achieving such a monumental task you'd expect some juicy end-game bonus content, but it's sadly lacking. An unlockable hard mode, as if the game wasn't hard enough, adds some extra speed to encounters, while those with a greater thirst for replayability can also apply simple modifiers, such as sacrificing your ability to roll. And for the truly masochistic, a survival-style mode challenges you to complete the game without dying once, which sounds more like torture than fun.

The fun in *Titan Souls* is in finally overcoming what initially feel like an impossible battles. In that regard, it's a celebration of gaming as it used to be in 'the good old days'. Seemingly void of any concern for mass-market accessibility, *Titan Souls* is wonderfully merciless. But winning – for the first time – is where all the fun lies. Replaying bosses isn't nearly as fun, nor as challenging (one of the game's Achievements is to beat it in 20 minutes). And so, much like a rollercoaster, *Titan Souls* is an exhilarating ride that's over all too quickly. Yet, for a mere £11, we would still urge you to get stuck in – it's the very fact that you'll love it so much that you'll feel such immense disappointment when it inevitably all comes to an abrupt end.

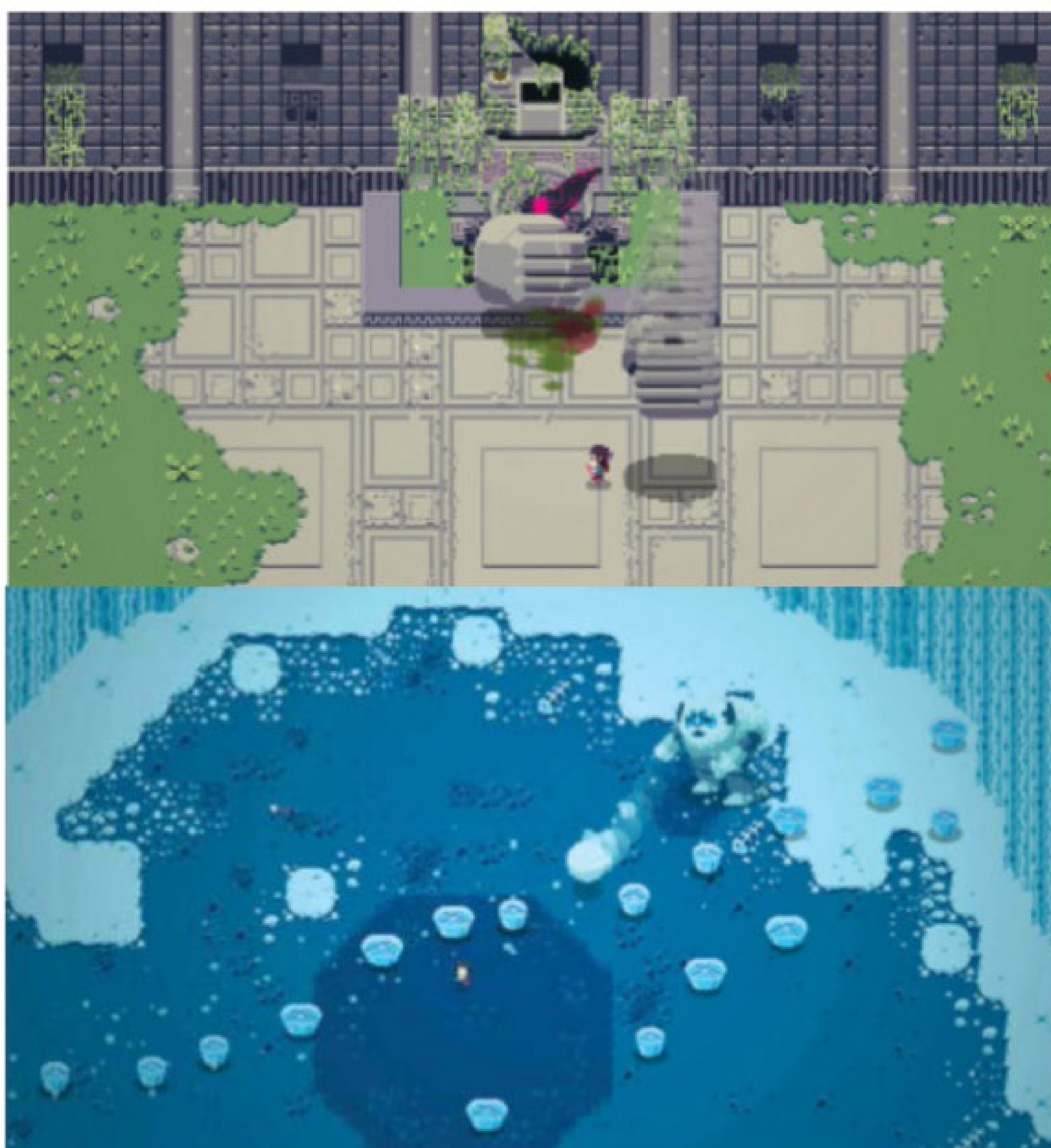
TITAN SOULS IS WONDERFULLY MERCILESS, A CELEBRATION OF GAMING AS IT USED TO BE IN THE GOOD OLD DAYS

FAQs

Q. HOW IS DEATH PUNISHED?
The game taunts you with a total death count on the file load screen. Otherwise, there's no limit to your lives.

Q. ANY ONLINE FEATURES?
No, but you could feasibly trade completion times with friends and compete to be the fastest giant killer.

Q. WHERE'S THE MASTER SWORD?
We know, right? The grand finale is pretty intense, but there's no all-powerful upgrade part-way through the game.



Above: *Titan Souls*' vast variety of bosses all have one thing in common – they're hell-bent on putting you to death in seconds. No friendly hints, no time-wasting interludes. Just pain. Left: The world is largely void of interactivity, but there are some hints of *Zelda*-inspired ingenuity, like this nod to *A Link To The Past*'s Lost Woods. Only one of four paths leads to the next area.

VERDICT

A FLEETING, EXHILARATING SLICE OF BOSS RUSH MADNESS

gamesTMmag scored **8** for
Titan Souls
Follow our scores on JUST A SCORE

WHEELY TRIES TO MAKE A MARK…

Ride





Above: Visually, *Ride* epitomises the concept of functional design. While there's not all that much to complain about, there's almost nothing to get excited about either. Some of the environments, in particular, leave much to be desired.

With the lucidity of a high-vis jacket, *Ride* wears its intentions on its toughened leather sleeve. To be the *Gran Turismo* of motorcycle games, that's the clear design goal here. A lofty one, too, bringing with it healthy and equal doses of respect and trepidation. Aiming your sights high results in either glorious success or crippling failure; such is the way of things when you set out to mimic a structure defined by the pioneer of a genre.

While not a total failure, *Ride* just doesn't match up to the company it pits itself alongside. A perfectly functional racing game, it never comes close to convincing that it's the definitive motorcycle experience. Developer Milestone clearly has great passion and understanding of the two-wheelers presented here, but the problem is that you never quite believe that it trusts players to feel the same.

Simply, there's too much hand-holding and not enough risk-taking. Where *Gran Turismo* feels like a celebration of cars and the cult around them, *Ride* feels like an unsure teacher preaching to a classroom that has never seen a bike before. High-speeds, danger, precise cornering angles and razor-fine overtaking manoeuvres; this is what racing bikes is about. Instead of that, we've got a game never fully prepared to take the training wheels off.

The bikes that you're eased into proceedings with are dreadfully slow, making what should be an exhilarating entry into this world a deliriously tired and tepid affair. While car simulators also take the softly, softly approach in their early going, they at least provide a challenge through the quality of the AI. *Ride* can't make the same claims, the competitors vying for the top spots with you being so conservative in their racing lines and overtaking that it makes you wonder whether they're actually racing you at all. It feels as though the teacher is letting the student win in order to generate some form of bond with the experience, but the reality is that you merely feel patronised.

Unsurprisingly, things get more difficult as you move up and strap bigger machines between your legs. Here the challenge of winning is coupled with wrestling to stay upright as you power through corners and are forced to take the optimum racing line to win – a welcome change of pace, but it feels a long time coming. If, like Milestone's *MotoGP 14*, *Ride* had the courage to let you loose on these bikes earlier on, the entire package would feel more like the celebration it claims to be. Unfortunately, it leaves it too late. By the time the main course is served most will have already left the track.

DETAILS

FORMAT: Xbox One
OTHER FORMATS: Xbox 360, PC, PlayStation 3, PlayStation 4
ORIGIN: Italy
PUBLISHER: Milestone
DEVELOPER: In-house
PRICE: £39.99
RELEASE: 27 March 2015
PLAYERS: 1-2 (2-12 Online)
ONLINE REVIEWED: Yes

BETTER THAN: MOTORCYCLE CLUB



WORSE THAN: MOTOGP 14

MISSING LINK

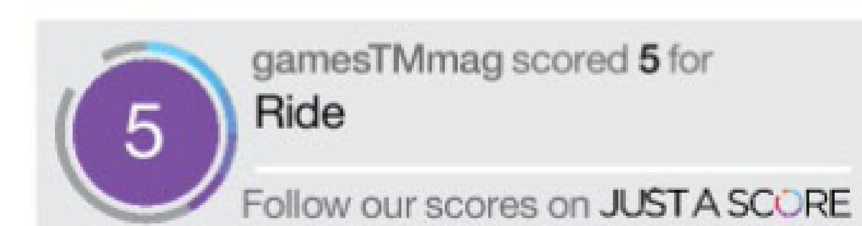
WHAT WE WOULD CHANGE

PACING: The bikes available at the start of the game are phenomenally boring to drive.

COMPETITION: Lightly put, the AI wouldn't stand a chance in the real world of competitive racing.

VERDICT

A GRAND IDEA THAT GETS STUCK IN FIRST GEAR



Below: The range is different bike types is commendable, but the problem comes from the fact that many of them are simply not fun to drive and, worse, offer barely anything by way of a challenge.



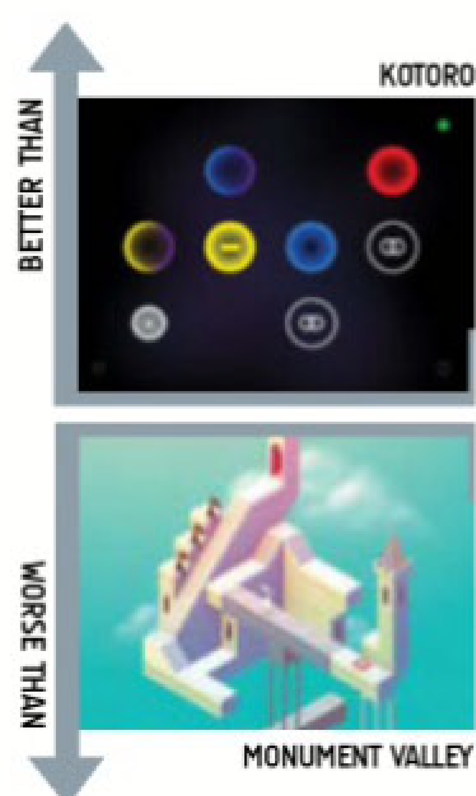


A JOURNEY THROUGH MIND AND SPACE

Last Voyage

DETAILS

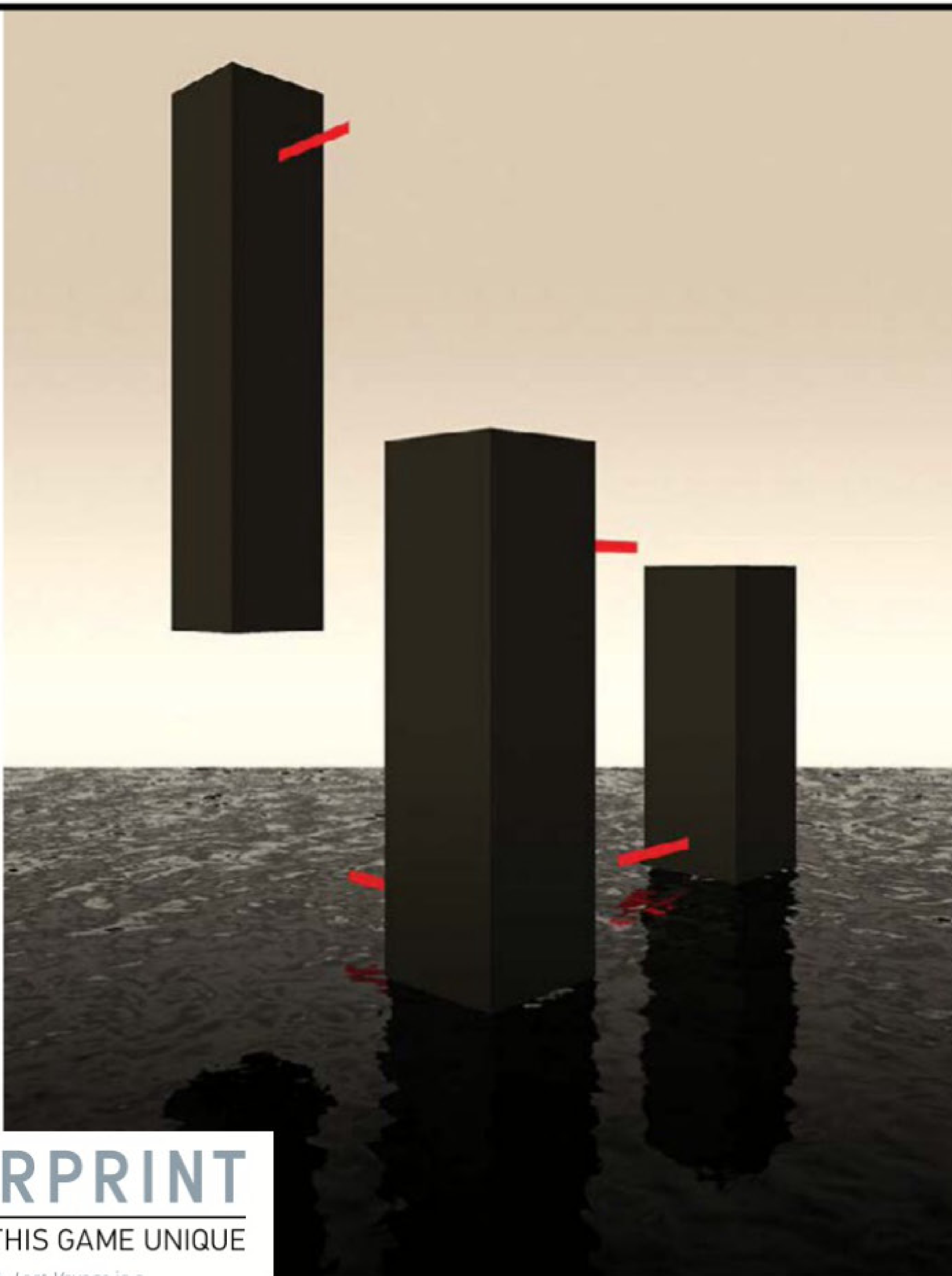
FORMAT: iOS
ORIGIN: Canada
PUBLISHER: Semidome Inc.
DEVELOPER: In-house
PRICE: £1.49
RELEASE: Out now
PLAYERS: 1



Place your headphones on and listen to the sound of our voice. You are about to embark on a voyage. Listen only to the sound of our voice. A voyage through time and space, your world perception may be challenged. Listen only to the sound of our voice. Do not be alarmed by the way you intuitively cruise inter-dimensional star lanes and solve complexly obtuse puzzles. Listen only to the sound of…

Last Voyage is strange. It's strange in the way that all hipster iOS games inherently seem to be. It's minimalist, combining an attention-arresting visual art style with an intoxicating forty-minute OST. Across five chapters you'll be introduced to five game mechanics; a series of puzzles that you assume you are supposed to solve but are given no strict direction to either way. It's a quirky iOS title, so of course there might be an incredibly abstract story waiting to be unearthed from beneath the pulsating rhythm and striking colours. Though that's totally up for interpretation.

games™ gets the impression that *Last Voyage* is a trance-like thematic passage through a space-time portal, conjuring vague comparisons to Dave's monolithic *2001: A Space Odyssey* adventure. You, on the other hand, might perceive *Last Voyage* to be the lunatic visualisation of an LSD trip gone wrong. Perhaps you simply see it as a series of pretty puzzles strung out across a linear path for an hour. Only a few things are for certain when it comes to *Last Voyage*: as a distraction, it's immediate. As an experience, it's intoxicating. As a *game* experience? Well, that's a little bit tricker to nail down.



Above: The puzzles aren't particularly challenging, though they seem purposefully obtuse. You are given little to no direction in *Last Voyage*.

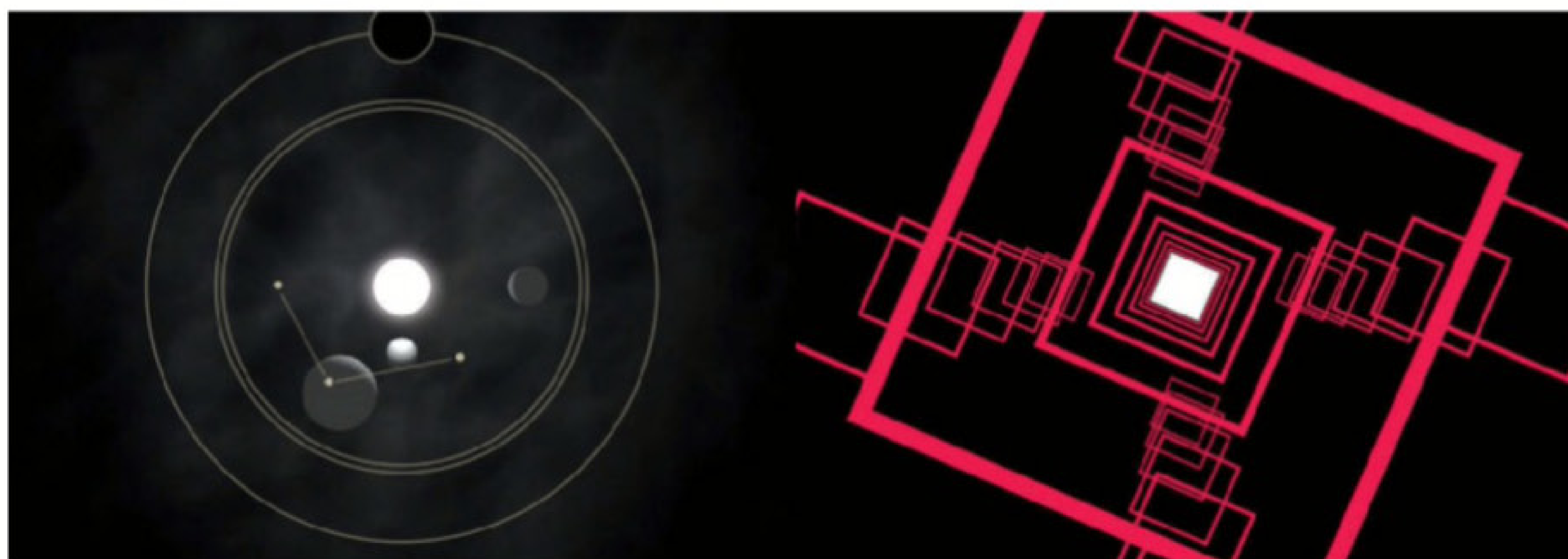
FINGERPRINT

WHAT MAKES THIS GAME UNIQUE

100 PER CENT STYLE: *Last Voyage* is a minimalistic audio-visual experience that's strangely engrossing from the first tap to the last. Despite its short length, it makes a strong impression.

At its core, *Last Voyage* is five chapters separated by various mechanics. You can tackle any chapter in any order that you please, though you may miss out on the larger message – or hell, discover a new one entirely - if there even is one to be found at all. Chapters One and Three focus on simple, yet strangely taxing puzzles. Simple prompts solve abstract problems. The other chapters play with 3D perception and your reactions across multiple dimensions. By the end you'll be left wanting more, that's for certain. But it could be because you felt like you didn't get enough, or because you wanted to experience more of Semidome's world.

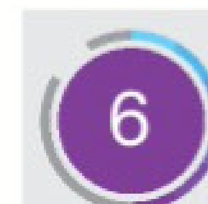
Best consumed with an uninterrupted hour of your time and a pair of headphones, *Last Voyage* is without question deeply engrossing. It will quickly sweep you away to another distraction-free plane of existence, one born of a pulsating red, black and white colour palette, and for that hour you'll feel like you are trapped in the coolest music visualisation program of all time. Haplessly, rhythmically, pushing the visualisation along so that a user on the other side of the glass can continue listening to their newly purchased album… we're in too deep. Now look what you've done, *Last Voyage*.



Above: *Last Voyage* won't be for everyone, but there's something intoxicating about its simplicity.

VERDICT

QUESTIONABLY A GAME, UNDOUBTEDLY AN EXPERIENCE



gamesTMmag scored **6** for
Last Voyage
Follow our scores on JUST A SCORE

STEEPED IN NOSTALGIA, LOST IN THE PAST

The Book Of Unwritten Tales 2

In the right circumstances, we're all prepared to forgive weaknesses in videogames. After all, flaws can be compensated for by strengths in other areas – some games have ideas that are so clever that you feel obliged to excuse a little shoddiness in the execution, some are constructed with such style and verve that you pardon the fact they are a little shallow. What's harder to forgive are those games that are just boring. Such is the case with *The Book Of Unwritten Tales 2*, a game that's not so much 'bad' as it is dull.

Its mediocrity starts with the story and characters. The game positions itself as a parody of the fantasy genre and some of its most notable works – it might have all the tropes and trappings that you'd associate with that genre, but it has none of the bite or wit required to actually

lampoon them in a way that's in any way amusing or insightful. The game also tries to incorporate contemporary political concerns into its tale and here it is a little more successful, occasionally revealing itself to be surprisingly perceptive, if ultimately a little toothless. As to its characters, they aren't unlikable for the most part, but neither do they really capture the heart. You feel some sympathy for the predicaments each finds themselves in, but they're ineffectively tied together, meaning that the game fails to provide an overarching thread that really pulls you through the story.

DETAILS

FORMAT: PC
OTHER FORMATS: Mac
ORIGIN: Germany
PUBLISHER: Nordic Games
DEVELOPER: King Art Games
PRICE: £29.99
RELEASE: Out now
PLAYERS: 1
MINIMUM SPEC: OS: Windows XP SP3/Vista/7/8, 2.0 GHz CPU, Memory: 2 GB, 512 MB Ram and PixelShader 3.0, DirectX: 9.0c, 13 GB available space





The hope here, then, is that the point-and-click puzzling will provide the compulsion to push you through. Unfortunately, that's not the case. It's clear that this is a game very much pitched at those who miss the golden age of point and click gaming, but in trying to capture the spirit of those games, *Unwritten Tales 2* also captures many of the frustrations those titles had – a bulging inventory; illogical puzzles that see you trying to use every item in a process of elimination; returning to past areas in search for items you might have missed; overlooking a dialogue option that's crucial to your progress – without having other strengths to compensate.

You end up interacting with every object in every area, not out of a sense of curiosity, but out of fear that you might miss something crucial. Once you start playing like that, it feels as if you're checking jobs off a list, rather than actually enjoying the experience intended. *Unwritten Tales 2* comes up unfavourably when compared to the classic games it tries to emulate, contemporary titles that have tried to do a similar thing, à la *Broken Sword 5*, and games that have tried to modernise the genre such as *The Walking Dead*. In that context, it would perhaps have been better if those 'unwritten tales' remained as such.

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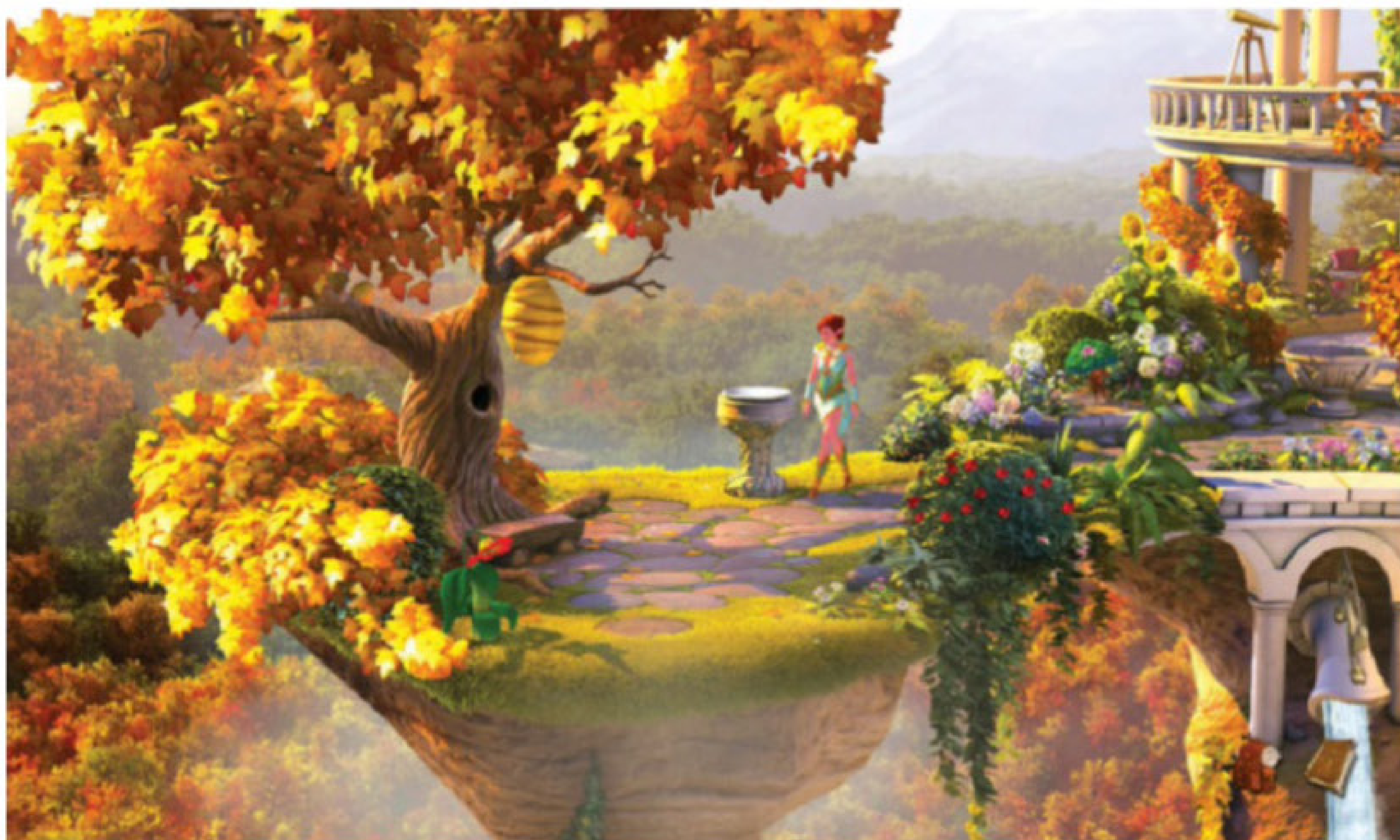
WHAT WE WOULD CHANGE

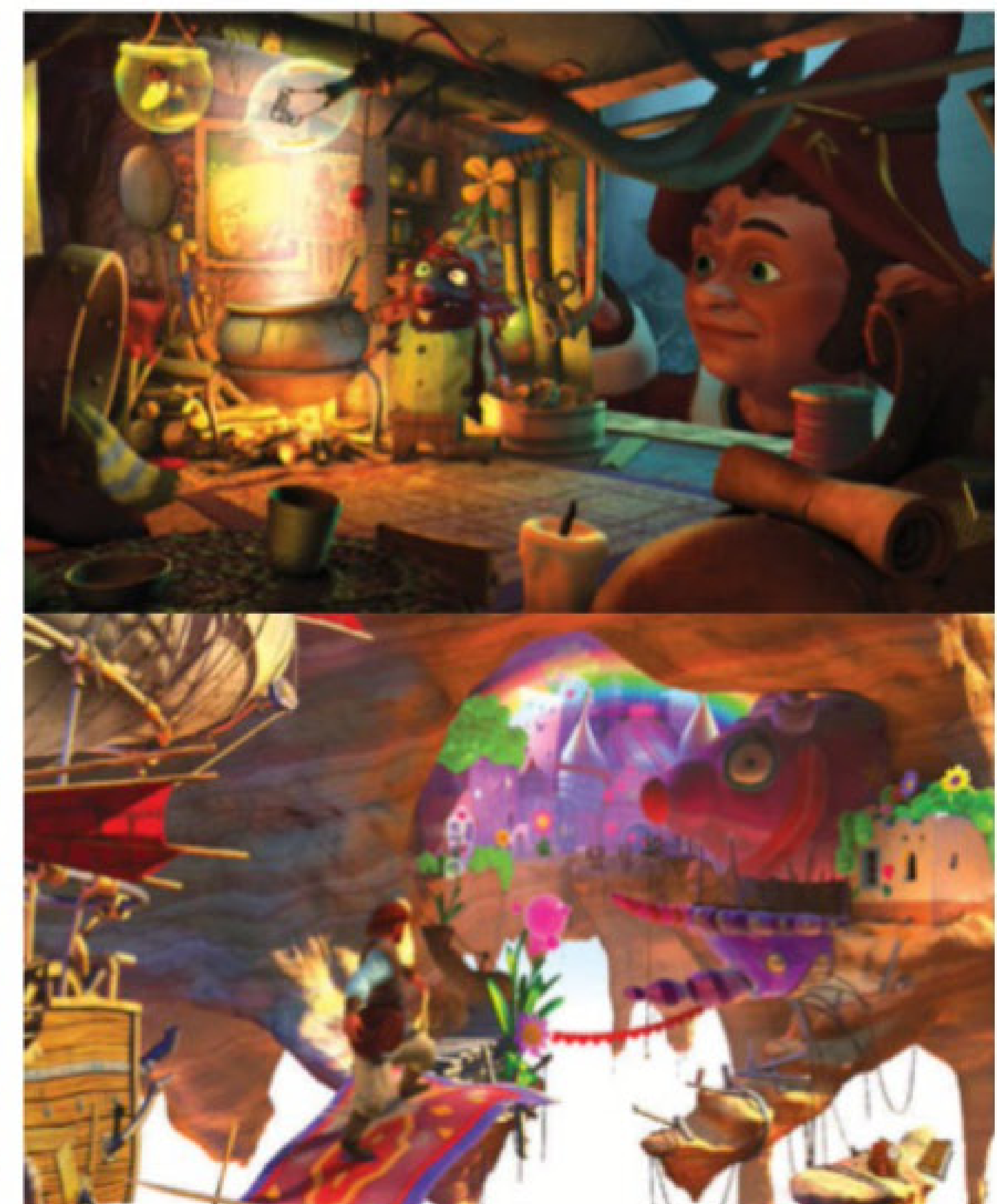
BORING BUSYWORK: There are a couple of instances in the game where you are tasked with finding a particular number of the same item. It's transparently busywork and doesn't need to be there.

VERDICT

AN UNINSPIRING ATTEMPT AT POINT-AND-CLICK NOSTALGIA

gamesTMmag scored **4** for
The Book Of Unwritten Tales 2
4
Follow our scores on JUST A SCORE





Above: The game does have its moments when it comes to visuals, though even there, the art direction lacks the inspiration for the game to really stand out.

Below: Cheese Hunt mode switches your bread for a cracker and tasks you with finding pieces of cheese dotted around the stage. Cleanliness is no longer a factor: instead your cracker's integrity is what matters, so be wary of any big drops.





BREAD DEAD REJECTION

I Am Bread

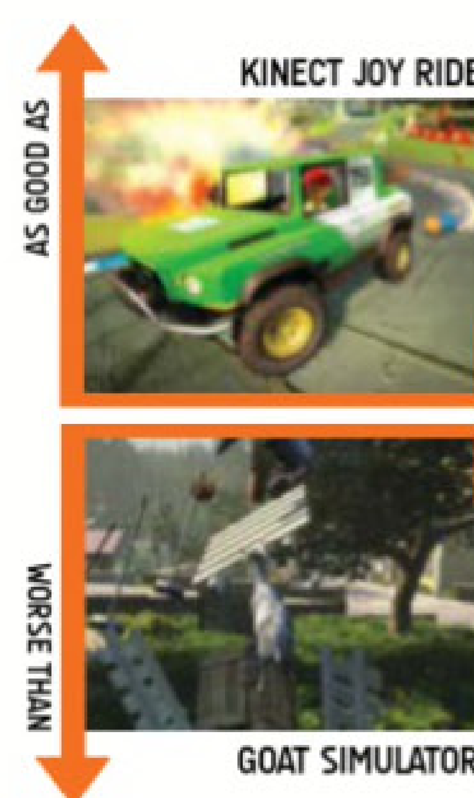
The latest in a line of novelty 'odd protagonist' games that have included *Goat Simulator* and *Octodad*, *I Am Bread* puts players in control of a single slice of bread. The aim? To become toast, of course. Developed by Bossa Studios, the team behind *Surgeon Simulator*, this has a similar vibe in that players have to perform a fairly straightforward task – in this case, getting from one end of the room to the other – with an obtuse control system.

Here, four buttons (preferably the shoulder buttons of a controller) each activate the 'grip' of a corner of the bread. By gripping the floor, wall, ceiling, or any objects in your path with certain corners, you can then use the analogue stick to flip your bread over. Repeating this lets you move across the room. Making things less straightforward is the floor, which is filthy. Your bread has an edibility meter, a bespoke energy bar that drastically drops whenever you're in contact with a dirty surface. Make your bread entirely inedible and it's Game Over.

DETAILS

FORMAT: PC
ORIGIN: UK
PUBLISHER: Bossa Studios
DEVELOPER: In-house
PRICE: £9.99
RELEASE: Out now
PLAYERS: 1
MINIMUM SPEC: Win 7, 2.4GHz processor, 2GB RAM, Nvidia Geforce GTS 450, 2.5GB hard drive space

AS GOOD AS: KINECT JOY RIDE



WORSE THAN: GOAT SIMULATOR

Initially an entertaining concept, *I Am Bread* ultimately becomes a niggly experience as its deliberately awkward control method clashes with its unintentionally erratic camera and physics. The idea that the simple act of climbing a chair is a massive accomplishment is a novel one, but it's only one of the numerous obstacles you need to overcome to reach your goal. This comes paired with the fact that it's all too common to mess up elsewhere just because the camera got stuck or because the temperamental controls meant you flipped forwards instead of backwards as you intended. At this point, repeating those herculean tasks ad infinitum starts to feel significantly less satisfying.

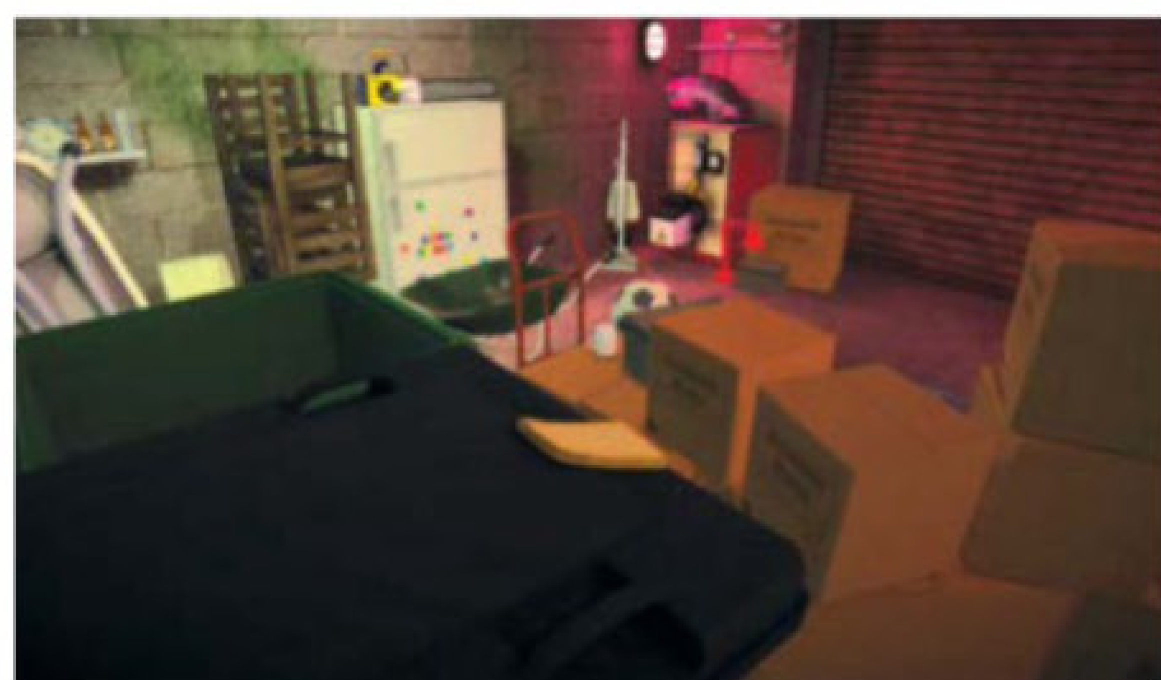
Almost aware that its game can be a little infuriating, Bossa has included the Magic Marmalade, a shiny power-up that appears at the start of the stage after you've died a few times and gives you infinite edibility and grip. This essentially does a Goldilocks and presents you with the other extreme, removing the challenge entirely and making the game nothing more than a test of patience as you stubbornly fumble your impeccable bread to its goal.

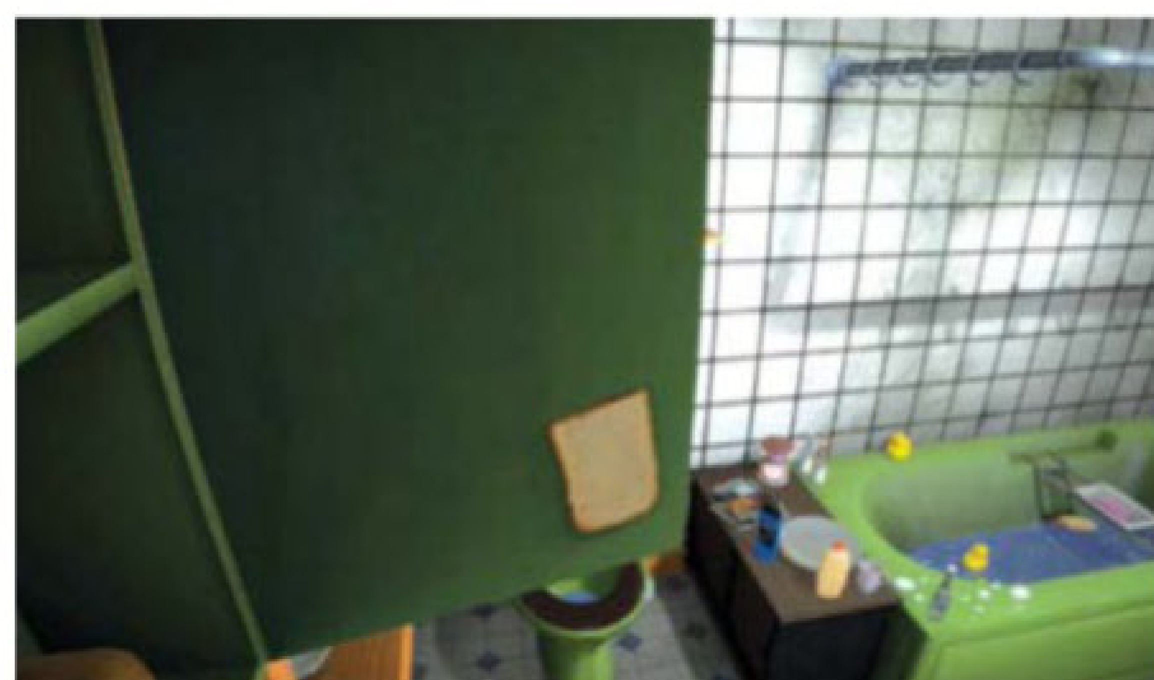
MISSING LINK
WHAT WE WOULD CHANGE

A(NOTHER) TOAST: It's a shame the main mode didn't have numerous varied missions instead of the sole 'become toast' goal. It makes its seven stages, though visually different, still feel rather similar.

A number of alternative modes have been added in an attempt to keep things interesting, but suffer from similar annoyances. Most notable is the Rampage mode, which asks you to cause as much damage as possible in a time limit but puts you in control of a baguette with only two grips, which is even harder to control.


I Am Bread is not without its charm but once you get over the humorous premise you're left with a game that irritates for reasons both unintended and deliberate. You'll have a few hours of fun but by the time its YouTuber-friendly novelty factor wears off you'll have decided it's far from the best thing since sliced bread.



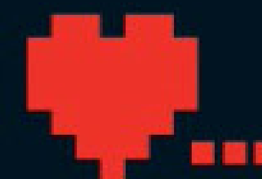


VERDICT
THIS BUG-FILLED BREAD LEAVES A BAD TASTE IN OUR MOUTH

4 — gamesTMmag scored **4** for I Am Bread
Follow our scores on JUST A SCORE


ノリ



WHY I ...

RHYTHM DENGOKU

DOMINIC MATTHEWS, PRODUCTION DEVELOPMENT NINJA, NINJA THEORY

I love Rhythm Tengoku *because I love rhythm action games. I don't think I've felt such a deep connection with any other games than I do with rhythm action. Because I played the Japanese version of* Rhythm Dengoku, *I had to figure out what all the menus meant before I could even take on the challenge of getting the rhythms right, so it felt like I really achieved something when I completed it, because I kind of powered through that by just understanding the mechanics alone. That gave me a really deep connection to that game, which sounds odd [laughs], but that's probably the one game that I've had a real journey with, over any other.*

"I don't think I've felt such a deep connection with any other games than I do with the rhythm action genre"

DOMINIC MATTHEWS, PRODUCTION DEVELOPMENT NINJA, NINJA THEORY

RETRO

NO.161

DISCUSS | Have your say on all things retro on our dedicated forum **www.gamestm.co.uk/forum**

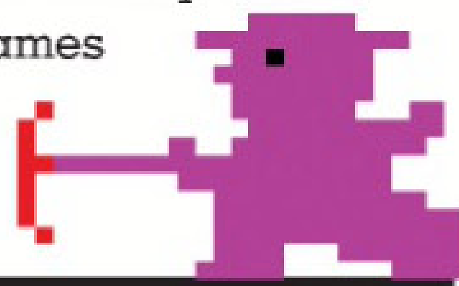
THE RETRO GUIDE TO...



During the Eighties and Nineties, Ocean Software turned into one of the UK's most prolific publishers. **games™** looks back at the games that helped make it become a worldwide success story

OCEAN SOFTWARE STARTED off life as a company called Spectrum Games, cutting its teeth on clones of popular arcade games. Founded by Jon Woods and David Ward in Manchester, it quickly began securing licences to popular films and TV shows and started porting numerous arcade games. Its early licences like *Highlander*, *Knight Rider* and *The Transformers* were largely poor, but the introduction of Gary Bracey saw the fortunes of the publisher soon turnaround and Ocean began to build a reputation for high quality interpretations of the latest hit films.

Ocean's arcade and film licences became essential purchases during the holiday seasons and saw it move from the 8 and 16-bit home computers to the far more competitive console market. Ocean for the most part decided to focus on Nintendo systems, and typically supported the NES, SNES and N64. Like many publishers of the time Ocean had a group of talented in-house developers but would also publish the work of others, most notably, Jon Ritman, Sensible Software and Denton Designs. Sadly, it struggled with the move to 3D gaming and was eventually acquired by Infogrames in 1996 and renamed to Infogrames UK. Its last game was 1998's *Mission: Impossible*, which was released for the N64 and is a disappointing swansong for such an important company. With a library of about 200 games (including the games published under its Imagine Software sub label) it would be impossible to cover all of them here, so we've highlighted some of its best and worst efforts. How many of the following 50 games listed did you play?





ROBOTICS 1983

ZX SPECTRUM

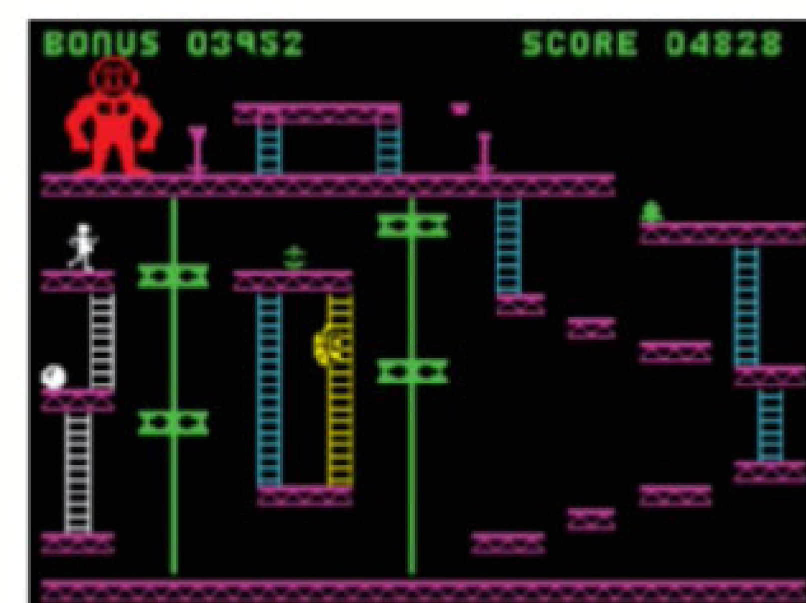
Ocean's first game was the first of many arcade rip-offs for the ZX Spectrum. Originally known as *Frenzy* and released on the Spectrum Games label, it was changed to Robotics due to Quicksilva also having a *Frenzy* game (which again was a rip-off of the popular arcade game *Berzerk*). All in all it's not a bad port of the Stern game, depicting a lone hero running around a maze shooting dangerous aliens and avoiding the electrified maze walls. Interestingly, *Berzerk*'s sequel was called *Frenzy*, but this is clearly based on the original.

KONG 1983

ZX SPECTRUM

Like many companies of the time, Ocean cashed in on the success of Nintendo's *Donkey Kong* with its very own clone. While *Kong* was reasonably authentic, it is let down by some really questionable collision detection that makes climbing ladders and avoiding certain enemies a real pain. It's also extremely hard to judge jumping barrels, which leads to many frustrating moments. The graphics are fine in a stickman type of way, but the annoying sound effects will have you reaching for the volume in no time. It's not a terrible conversion, but it lacks the fun of the arcade original.





DIGGER DAN 1983

ZX SPECTRUM

Dig holes to trap aliens, then fill them in again before they can get out, all against a tight time limit. You've guessed it, it's another unofficial arcade clone – this time of the venerable platformer *Space Panic*. While it looks authentic enough, it's a little fast-paced compared to the arcade original with some questionable collision detection that makes the digging rather irritating. Not bad, but not great either.





PUD PUD IN WEIRD WORLD 1984

ZX SPECTRUM

This strange game was created by Jonathan 'Joffa" Smith – his first game for Ocean. It's a bizarre platformer that has you searching the maze-like world for 10 missing puddings. Certain enemies will give health, while others drain it, but it's not always clear which are which. Also, stay away from Mrs Pud Pud as she causes instant death. One lovely touch is your dwindling energy bar, pushing you on to explore the large world.

GILLIGAN'S GOLD 1984

COMMODORE 64, ZX SPECTRUM



Ocean once again struck gold with an unofficial conversion of Stern's *Bagman*. It's an incredibly slick interpretation of the obscure coin-op and has you running round the multi-screen single stages in search of gold that must be dumped into a handily placed wheelbarrow at the top of the screen. It sounds dull, but being constantly changed by villains keeps you on your toes and the stage design is rock solid.

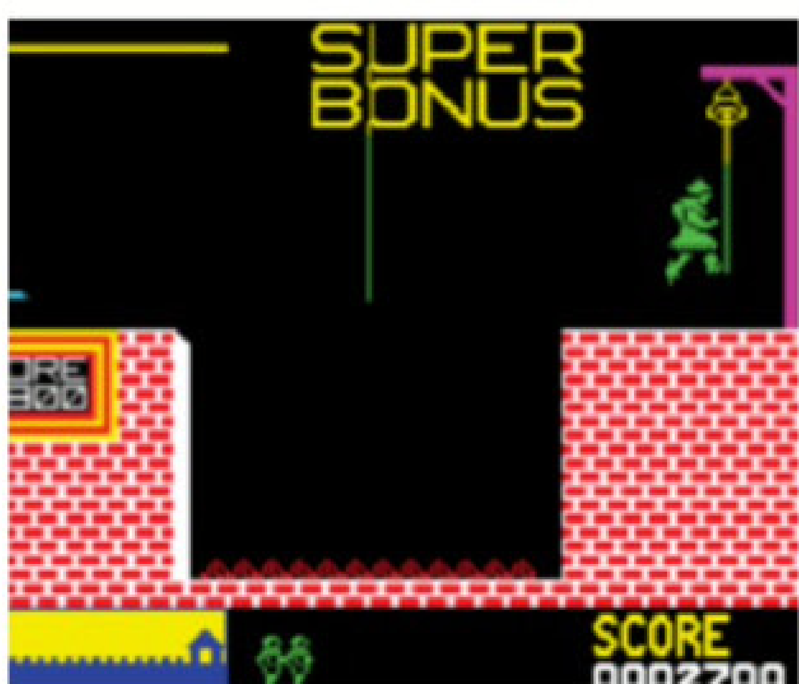
MR WIMPY 1984

COMMODORE 64, ZX SPECTRUM

Based on the popular mascot for the Wimpy food chain, *Mr Wimpy* is another arcade clone, this time of Data East's classic *Burger Time*. It's actually quite a fun fast-paced game where you run around trying to create delicious hamburgers, while avoiding the kitchen rebels that can be fended off with limited supplies of pepper. One additional section over the original game has Mr Wimpy trying to collect ingredients while avoiding man holes.







HUNCHBACK 1984

VARIOUS

After cutting its teeth making unofficial arcade clones Ocean eventually started securing licences properly. It proved a wise move as games like *Hunchback* proved the publisher was more than capable of matching the arcade originals with great accuracy when it needed to make the effort. *Hunchback* was a very good example of Ocean's change in direction, let down only by some annoying attribute clash and some occasionally unfair collision detection, frustrating gamers.

DALEY THOMPSON'S DECATHLON 1984

VARIOUS

Ocean was great at spotting opportunities in the unlikeliest of places. This epic *Track & Field* clone not only cashed in on the 1984 Olympics with a loud kerching, but also the famous Daley Thompson. It's one of the first and best joystick wagglers for home computers, and has you tackling ten progressively tougher events, from the 100 metres to Pole Vault and Shot Putt. Its raging success spawned two additional sequels: *Supertest* and *Olympic Challenge*.



MATCH DAY 1984

VARIOUS

When Ocean wanted a football game to match the brilliance of *International Soccer*, Jon Ritman was the man who took up the challenge. Despite not playing the rival's game he created a stunning football game that featured corners, controllable goalies, throw-ins dribbling and much more. The ugly sprites were cribbed from Jon's previous game, Bear Bovver, but the gameplay itself was pure gold. A greatly improved sequel was released in 1987.





COSMIC WARTOAD 1985

VARIOUS

A highly entertaining effort from Denton Designs that has you traversing an 8x8 grid in search of 8 missing tools hidden around the time grid. It's not the easiest game to get your head around, but the varied mini-games will test your reflexes and the main playing board will take a while to figure out. An oddity, but one worth persevering with.

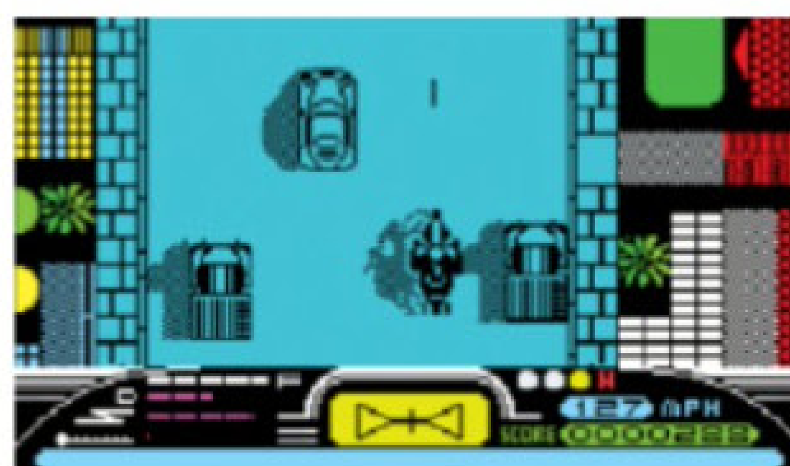
"IT'S ONE OF THE FIRST AND BEST JOYSTICK WAGGLERS FOR HOME COMPUTERS"

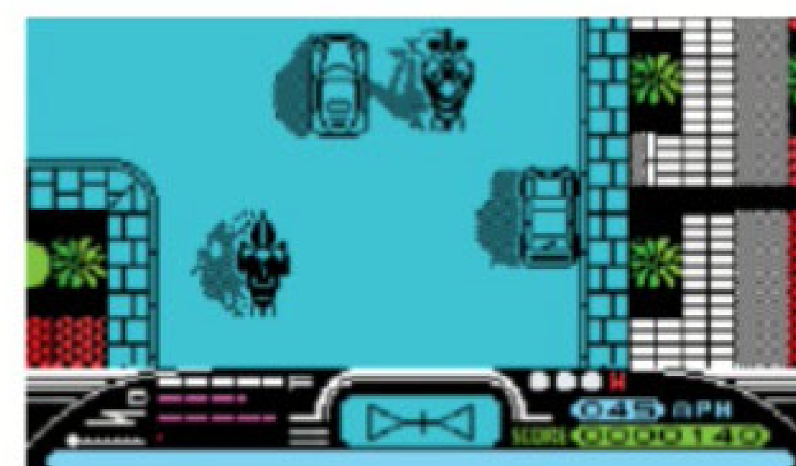


STREET HAWK 1986

VARIOUS

There are actually two Ocean *Street Hawk* games. One was pushed out in 1985 and ended up being a rather weak *Defender* clone with weedy visuals and naff sound effects. The version shown here was released the following year and delivered far more polished visuals, an overhead view, but dull gameplay and sluggish controls. Both aren't really worth bothering with.

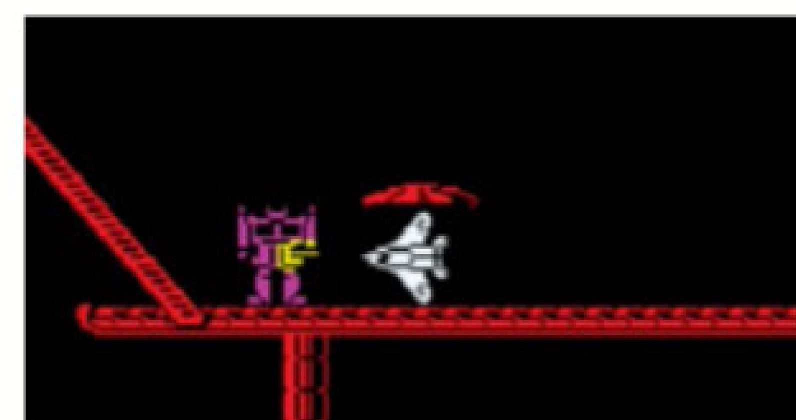




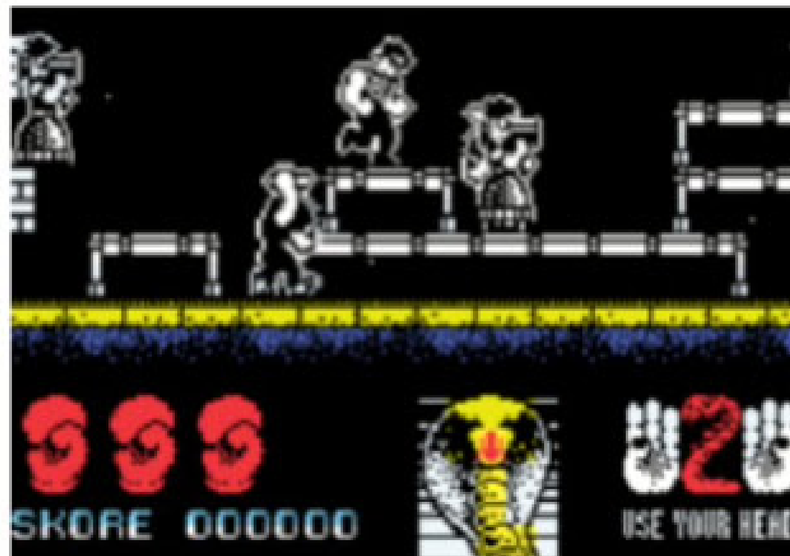
THE TRANSFORMERS 1986

VARIOUS

The first game based on the popular transforming robots was pretty terrible. Created by Denton Designs, it's a horrendous platform run-and-gun with pretty atrocious visuals and extremely dull gameplay. Transforming is exciting for the first few times, but it can't hide the terribly dull lack of depth the game has.







COBRA 1986

VARIOUS

Forget the terrible film it's based on and revel in the madness of Jonathan Smith's Spectrum game. Action is crazy, featuring a head-butting main character, prams that stun you on contact and weapons concealed in burgers. It's as bizarre as it sounds, but works due to excellent cartoon-styled visuals and fast-paced run-and-gun action. Oh, and the fire button is called "Murder".

HIGHLANDER 1986

VARIOUS

Here's more proof that not every film licence Ocean touched in the early days of the company turned to gold. *Highlander* should have been a sword and sorcery take on *Way Of The Exploding Fist*, but it ended up being a right mess thanks to stilted animation, poor controls and terrible collision detection. Thank god there was only one of them.







THE GREAT ESCAPE 1986

VARIOUS

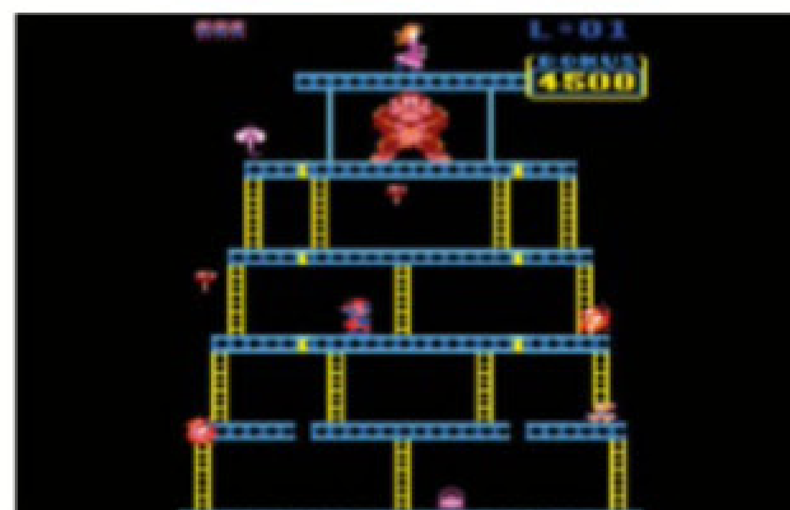
Denton Designs did a number of games for Ocean, but this is arguably one of its best. It's a cleverly designed isometric adventure that sees you trying to break out of a concentration camp. The genius however comes from having to attempt your escape while attending the humdrum drills of everyday life in the prison. It's not the easiest of games to master, but the clever concept, great visuals and clever gameplay means it still holds up today.

DONKEY KONG 1986

VARIOUS

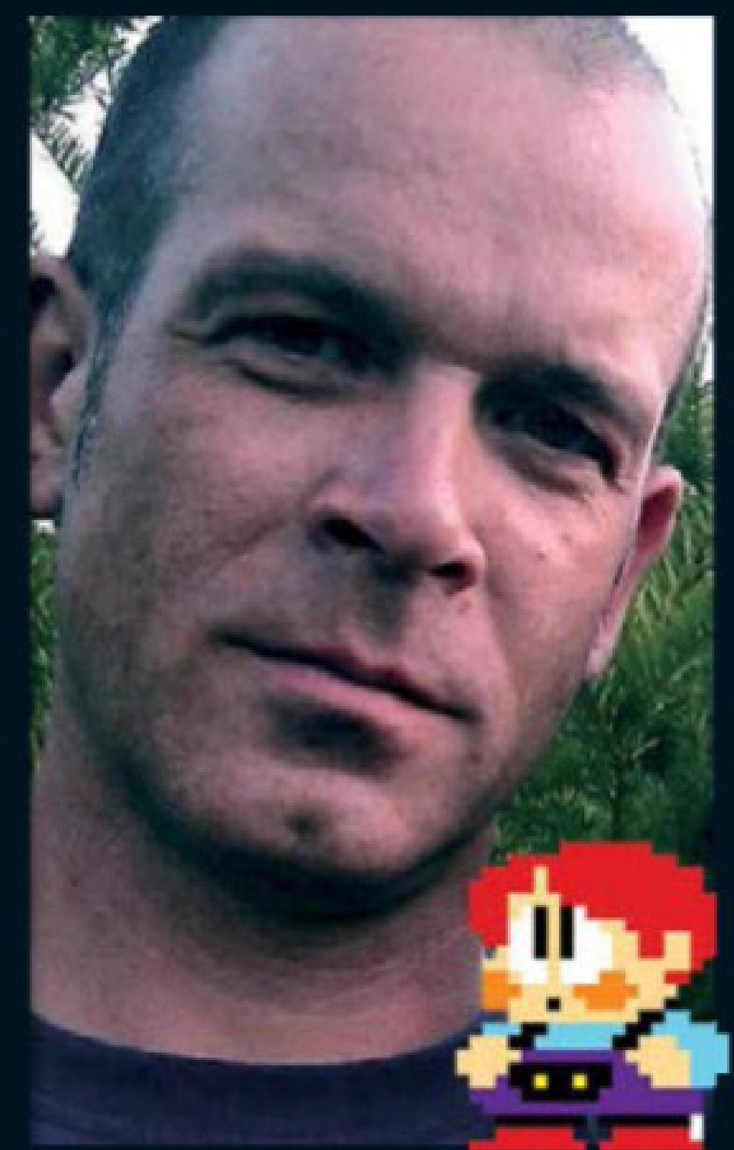
Kong may have been a naughty unofficial clone of *Donkey Kong*, but Ocean made amends with this incredible Amstrad port of Nintendo's classic arcade game. It's a stunning achievement that not only features incredibly authentic visuals and tight controls, but also manages to cram all 4 levels into the game – something even Nintendo couldn't manage with its original NES port. It even has the fabled kill screen! Forget *Chase HQ*, *this* is the best arcade port Ocean achieved in its lifetime.





AN INTERVIEW WITH MARK JONES

The graphic artist has fond memories of Ocean



What's your lasting memory of working at Ocean?

The general atmosphere of the place; the constant noise of the arcade machines, programmers running and testing the latest version of whatever game they were working on, mixed in with the sound of the games testers testing the new games and the returns that had come back. They had to test them to see if the tapes were faulty, so we were constantly hearing those C64 Ocean loader tunes as they loaded them.

Why do you feel Ocean is so highly regarded?

Because, despite the licences for which they are still criticised for, everyone in-house at Ocean always tried to do their best and make the games as good as they could given the time we were given. Everyone tried to outdo everyone else, not in a nasty way, but in a 'Hey, look what I've managed to do' type way. We were all allowed to put our names on the games we worked on so why would anyone with any sense put their name to something they hadn't put 100% into?

What was the secret to Ocean's success?

Gary Bracey had put together, whether by fluke or expertise, a killer team downstairs at Ocean. A team who genuinely loved games and wanted to make great games that, had they not made them themselves, would have wanted to play. David Ward and Jon Woods did what they did and did it well. Gary and Lorraine kept control of all the loonies downstairs in the basement where the games were made. Lord knows how. I was still a kid really, and regularly acted like one so how anything was finished is still a bit of a mystery to me.

What games do you feel typified Ocean?

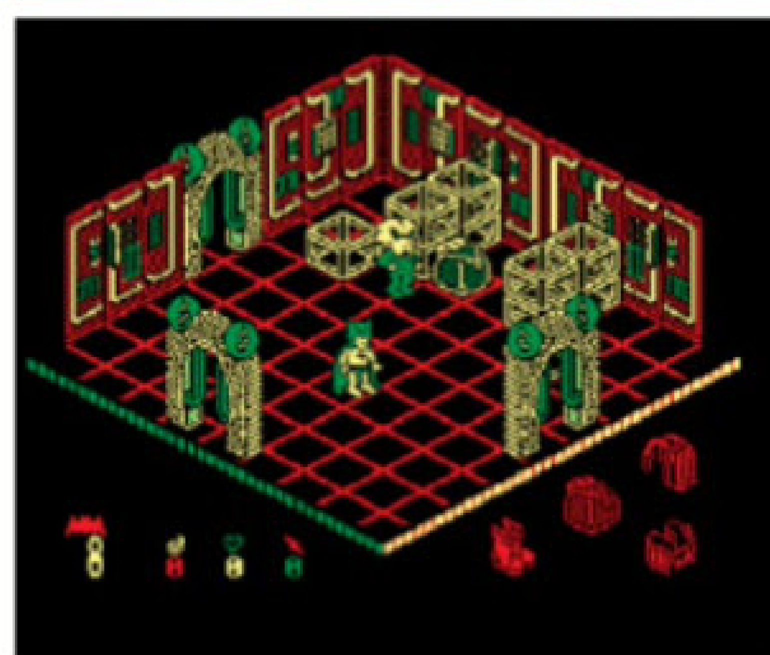
Well for me it was the early ones. The ones that I used to play as a kid and the ones that made me apply to Ocean for a job. So it was titles like *Pogo*, *Moon Alert*, *Daley Thompson's Decathlon*, *Hypersports* and *Mikie*. These were great games, with great loading screens and artwork. They were highly polished, especially the games by Joffa.

What was Ocean like as a first job?

Yes, I was 16 when I started. It was unreal really. I had to keep pinching myself to make sure I wasn't dreaming and I'd wake up and find myself back working in the computer games shop that I'd just left. I've *never* had a job as exciting and as interesting as working at Ocean and I doubt I ever will again but I'm *so* proud to have played a tiny part in that big clockwork-like machine that was Ocean Software. And none of us had *any* idea that we'd still be talking about nearly 30 years after the fact.

BATMAN 1986

AMSTRAD, ZX SPECTRUM



One of Ocean's earliest licences was also the first *Batman* game. Created by Jon Ritman it's an extremely slick isometric adventure that has Batman searching the Batcave for several missing pieces of the Batmobile so he can save Robin. It was well received on release and led to Ocean securing the licence for several more games, including a text adventure that was never released.

GRYZOR 1987

VARIOUS

While all Ocean's conversions of Konami's *Contra* were enjoyable, we'd argue that the Amstrad version is the best of the bunch. It may lack scrolling, but the graphics are exceptionally well detailed, while the gameplay and level design is extremely faithful to the arcade original. A superb port of a highly entertaining run-and-gun.



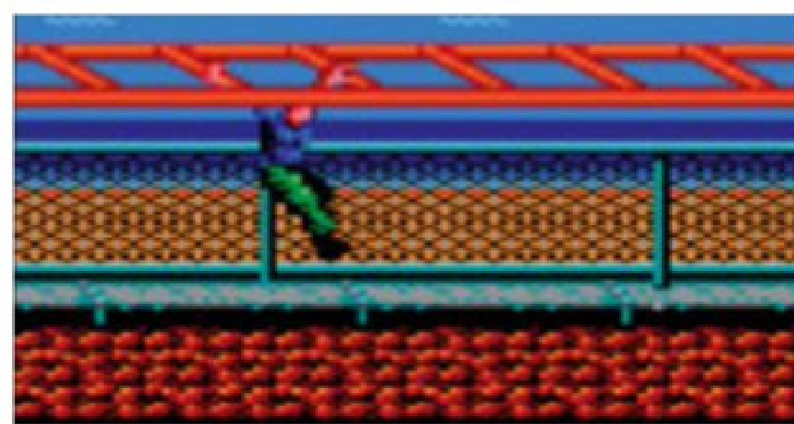


COMBAT SCHOOL 1987

VARIOUS

The original *Combat School* by Konami was a multi-tiered military event game in the style of *Track & Field and Hyper Sports*. Ocean's control method wasn't as elegant as the arcade version (it didn't have access to a trackball) but it still delivered a highly polished conversion that featured all the original levels. The C64 version has a particularly excellent rendition of *I Want To Be Your Drill Instructor.*





WIZBALL 1987

VARIOUS

This excellent take on the shoot-'em-up genre has you collecting droplets of paint so you could restore colour to the drab world you live in. It has a power-up system similar to *Gradius* and eight increasingly challenging levels to work your way through. The sequel, *Wizkid*, plays completely differently but is just as good, with an interesting music theme.



SIMON BUTLER REMEMBERS



The Ocean graphic artist looks back



How important was Gary Bracey to Ocean Software?
To be honest I don't think that Ocean would have been half the company without Bracey. He wore a wide variety of hats, company spokesperson, corporate face, general boss to the minions in the dungeons of Central Street, and he was also a friend to pretty much everyone there. I'm proud to call him my friend today.

He was as much a part of the development process as the artists and coders and there is more than a smidgen of Bracey magic in each of those titles.

How did Ocean compare to the current games industry?
It had passion born from a genuine love of what we were doing. But as opposed to anyone today who claims to believe in their creation, we were doing something for the first time. We were at the forefront of something that was totally new in the world and no one can ever replicate that or take it away from us. The coders were pushing the machines with every title, the artists were learning skills that had never existed before and regardless of the fact that I have said this a million times before, we had no-one to turn to for advice.

What was its secret to success?
Money. Pure and simple. They had money, they knew how to use it and they purchased the biggest arcade titles or the latest movies for conversion and the best UK talent to create the products. Combine that with the skills of people like Finnegan and Bracey and you'll understand how Ocean became the powerhouse of the industry. David Ward and Jon Woods were very shrewd guys; they knew sweet bugger-all about computer games but they knew business and that's all Ocean was – a business, and they were determined to do anything to make it succeed.

How do you feel Ocean should be remembered?
Like all companies they released their fair share of stinkers and a lot of those had my name on them, but that's the industry; it's all about learning and doing things better next time, or doing the best you can against ridiculous deadlines.

Ocean carved a place in games history and they did it by determination, professionalism, hard-work and creativity. We were a game development studio, pure and simple, attempting to create things that would entertain and challenge our audience who we never expected to remember us three decades later. So if we are to be remembered it should be as a studio who always tried; we didn't always succeed, but we tried and we tried our best.

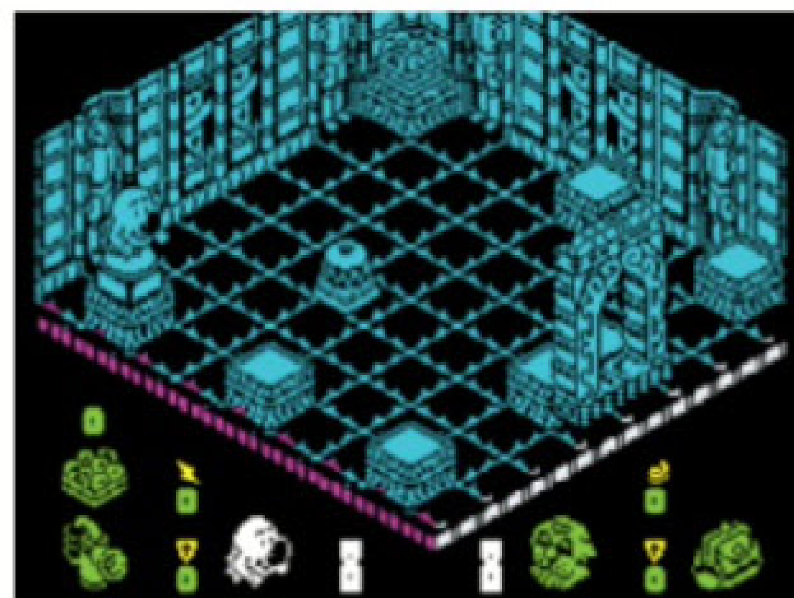
What are you doing now?
I'm working on a spin-off of the incredibly successful PC title *Terraria*. It's called *Terraria Otherworld* and it's being developed by a company out in Holland. I'm responsible for the sprite creation, as usual.

I'm plotting pixels and hoping players like what they see. I'm currently illustrating a book for children called *The Little Things in Life* based around the doodles I put on Facebook – fingers crossed it will find its way onto the high-street bookshelves.

HEAD OVER HEELS 1987

VARIOUS

Arguably one of the greatest isometric games of all time thanks to clever level design from Jon Ritman and an ingenious main mechanic that has you switching between (and eventually combining) the two titular characters. It's a typically British game thanks to bizarre cultural references and some quirky creature designs from artist Bernie Drummond. An instant classic that's only improved with age.





PLATOON 1988

VARIOUS

Although this was quite impressive in scope it's not one of Ocean's better movie licences due to a lack of focus. There are some annoying maze levels, which are further hindered by cluttered visuals. It's tough too, featuring some extremely difficult sections that feel quite unbalanced. Interestingly, the 16-bit offerings are far weaker than the 8-bit ones.

WHERE TIME STOOD STILL 1988

NINTENDO 3DS

Another glorious isometric adventure from Denton Designs. This one has you trying to lead four crashed survivors to safety before they get munched on by dinos or attacked by natives. Each character has their own distinct traits, while the cleverly designed environment really gives you the impression of being lost in a strange foreign world. It was recently unofficially ported to the Amiga, which didn't receive a port at the time of the game's original release.



OPERATION WOLF 1988

VARIOUS

Ocean had a great relationship with Taito that saw it deliver a number of very authentic ports for home systems during the Eighties and Nineties. This classic shooter from 1988 impressed on most systems of the time, with the Spectrum and Amstrad versions being particularly slick. The Amiga and ST ports not only have better visuals, but also feature mouse support.







ROBOCOP 1988

VARIOUS

This astonishing effort set the template for virtually all of Ocean's later film licences and is easily one of the company's most famous games. It cherry-picks the best sections from the film and finds the most sensible way to translate them into a coherent playing experience. While the majority of the action is run-and-gun, there are some excellent mini-games that range from putting together the identity of a villain to rescuing a woman from a crazed knifeman. The 16-bit versions have more in common with Data East's arcade game, but every single version is a delight to play. Little wonder that it spent an eternity in the games chart at the time of its release. This was Ocean as its very best.

> "LITTLE WONDER [ROBOCOP] SPENT AN ETERNITY IN THE GAMES CHART AT THE TIME OF ITS RELEASE"





CABAL 1989

VARIOUS

Although *Cabal* wasn't the greatest arcade game, Special FX Software turned it into a very impressive home port. It kept the two-player action of the original, sported iconic cover art by renowned Ocean artist Bob Wakelin and maintained the stop-and-start control system of the original. It also features all the building destruction too, making for a hectic, enjoyable blaster.

THE NEW ZEALAND STORY 1989

VARIOUS



Ocean ported Taito's cute platformer starring a tooled-up Kiwi with various degrees of success. While the Amiga, ST and Spectrum versions are highly impressive to look at and play, the C64 and Amstrad ports aren't as strong. In fact the Amstrad one is incredibly poor, with gaudy visuals and horrendous scrolling – best avoided by fans of the original.

AN INTERVIEW WITH IVAN HORN

We chat to the man behind Operation Wolf and many other hits



What's your best conversion and why?
I think that Operation Wolf was probably my favourite conversion as recording video of the whole game for reference was a lot of fun to do, plus it was a challenging game to do on the 8 bit computers.

Did you get assigned games to port or could you choose them?
We were assigned which games to work on, however one exception was our first Athena, which we had a choice of doing either that or Ikari Warriors. We played IW on infinite lives for what felt like forever and we didn't get to the end, so chose Athena as we thought it had to be shorter/easier to do.

Why do you think the focus was mainly on arcade ports and licences?
I think primarily because it was seen as a low risk, both in terms of them being known, and tried and tested from a design point of view, but also because the scope of the games were a known quality.

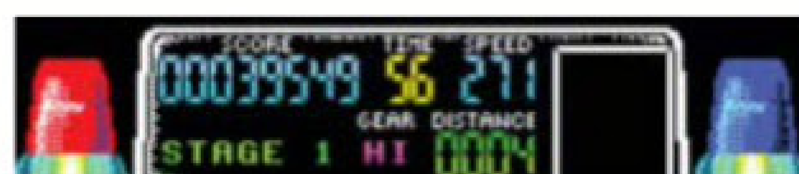
How does working at Ocean compare to the current games industry?
Life in the industry is very different today, a little less entertaining in some ways, but a lot more organised (thank goodness), plus there's a lot more scope in terms of what we can achieve as developers.



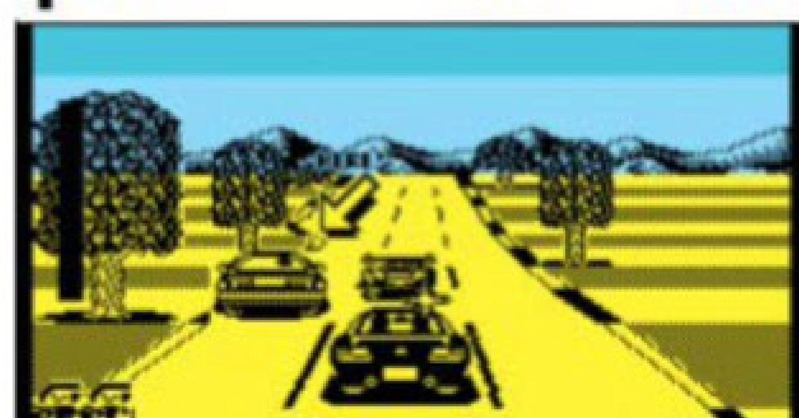
CHASE H.Q. 1989

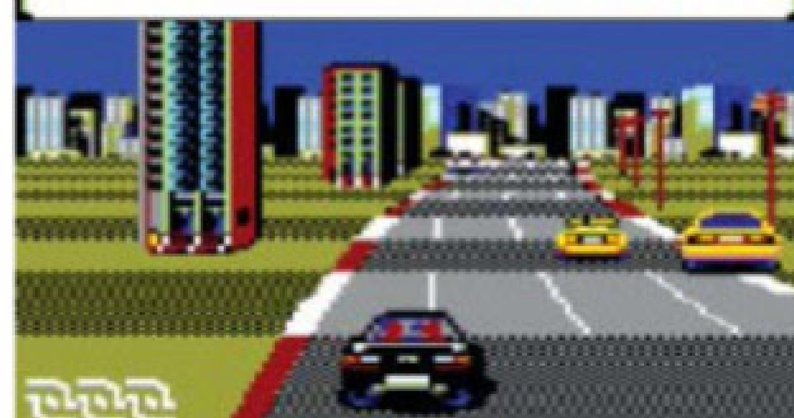
VARIOUS

■ Ocean's version of Taito's arcade cops and robbers game is still great fun. It's a faithful conversion that captures all the spills and thrills of the arcade original. While the 16-bit conversions are extremely polished, it's the outstanding Spectrum and Amstrad ports that really manage to impress. Just remember to stay clear of the terrible C64 port.











BATMAN THE MOVIE 1989

VARIOUS

■ A superb game that helped shift lots of Amigas at the time of release thanks to the "Batman Pack". While it's similar in style to Robocop, it introduces a rope swing that adds a Bionic-Commando-style play mechanic. The side-on 8-bit Batmobile and Batwing sections are replaced by incredible first-person sequences for the Amiga and ST outings that still look great today. It's easily one of the best Batman games on a home computer and even those with little interest in the Dark Knight will enjoy it.



OPERATION THUNDERBOLT 1989

VARIOUS

■ Ocean's follow-up to Taito's arcade sequel struggled on the 8-bit machines as they weren't as adept at adapting the into-the-screen sections of the game (although they did manage to include the much-welcome two-player mode). The game fares best on the 16-bit home computers, but it's not one of Ocean's strongest arcade conversions, making Wolf a far more consistent shooter, regardless of format.

RED HEAT 1989

VARIOUS



■ The film wasn't great and neither is the game. As Arnie, you punch your way through non-descript levels, dying a little inside with each swing. The giant animated sprites look cool, but the gameplay is diabolical, proving that not all Ocean's later licences got it right. The best bit is the obvious Stallone character sneaked into the 16-bit versions.

THE UNTOUCHABLES 1989

VARIOUS

This was another smash hit for Ocean and deservedly so. While the first level is a little weak, consisting of simply running around a big warehouse, the later stages become far more interesting in the design and execution. It manages to capture all the highlights of the Brian De Palma film, with the steps and bridges sequences benefiting most from the adaptation.



PANG 1990

VARIOUS

Pang's blend of blasting and puzzling impressed in arcades and led to great home ports by Ocean. The 16-bit versions look and play identically to the original, meaning lots of frantic blasting as you avoid bubbles and pick up the varied power-ups.







SHADOW WARRIORS 1990

VARIOUS

Ocean's port of Tecmo's coin-op was a little on the messy side. Most of the 8-bit ports suffer from poor visuals and slow gameplay, while the collision detection is also hit and miss. The Amiga and ST outings are much better, mainly because they keep the two-player mode that made the arcade original so enjoyable to play. Fun fact – Shadow Warriors is actually just another name for the first Ninja Gaiden.

MIDNIGHT RESISTANCE 1990

VARIOUS

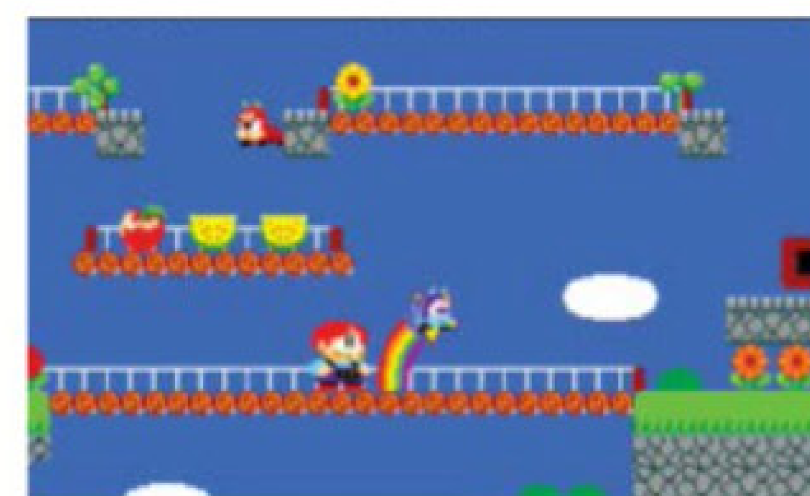
It was never going to be easy to convert the rotary dial of Data East's original run-and-gun, but Special FX Software gave it a good shot. The end result is a far more clunky play experience, but it remains a solid blaster capturing practically everything that made the arcade original such robust fun. Special mention must go to Jim Bagley's impressive Amstrad and Spectrum efforts, which really do look the business.

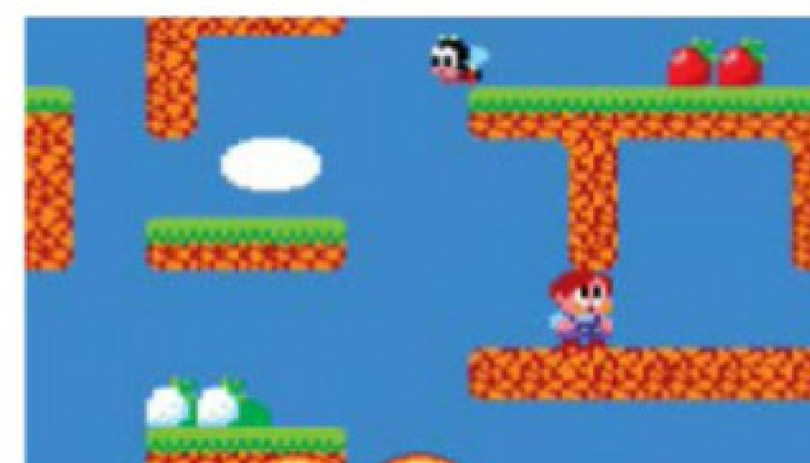


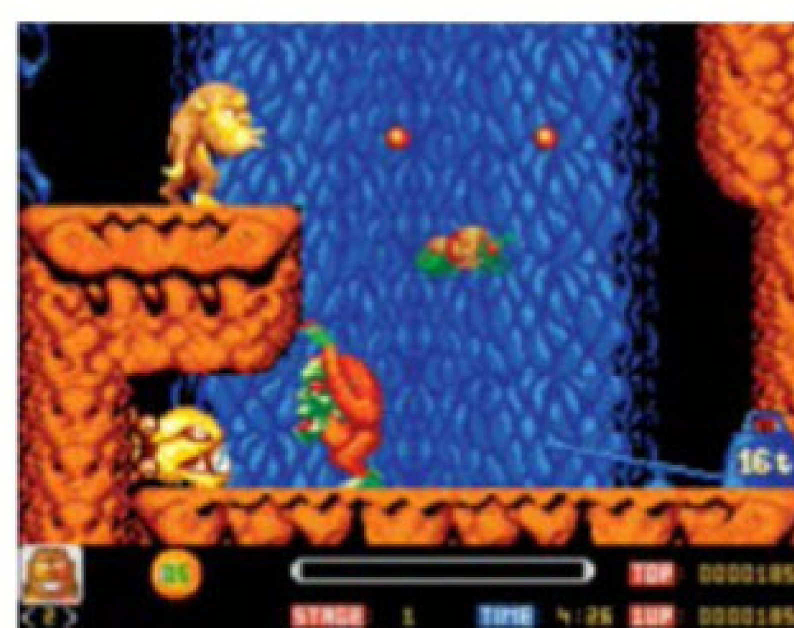
RAINBOW ISLANDS 1990

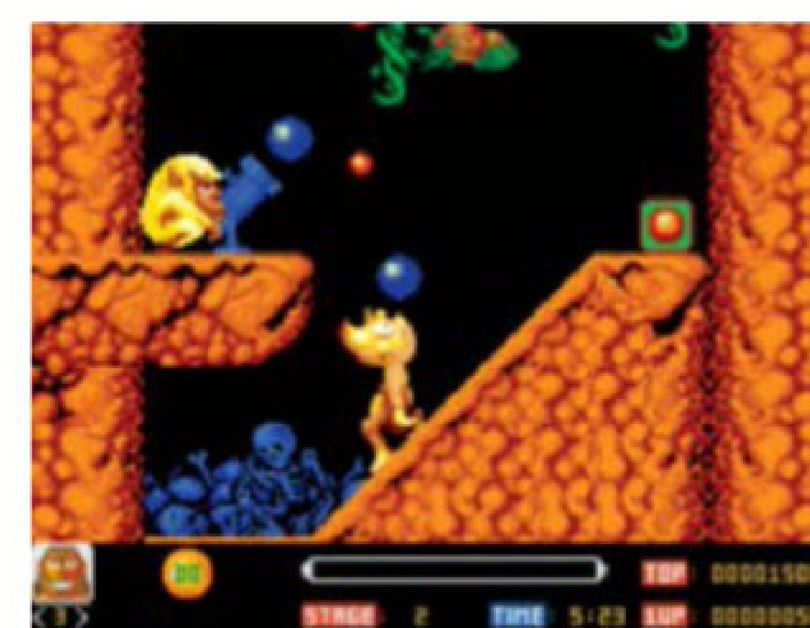
VARIOUS

It might not be as well respected as Bubble Bobble, but Rainbow Islands is still a highly entertaining platformer and a more than worthy sequel. While the Amiga version is virtually arcade perfect, all of Graftgold's conversions were right on the money, ensuring that the rainbow-throwing mayhem that made the arcade version such a joy to play was perfectly captured regardless of which system you owned.









TOKI 1991

VARIOUS

This platform/run-and-gun hybrid isn't the most well known of coin-ops, but that didn't stop Ocean from delivering some slick conversions. The visuals are top notch, while the collision detection and controls feel tight and responsive. The only things that lets it down is a high difficulty level, particularly on the Commodore 64. Sadly the Amstrad and Spectrum versions never made it to the shops.



THE SIMPSONS: BART VS THE SPACE MUTANTS 1991

VARIOUS

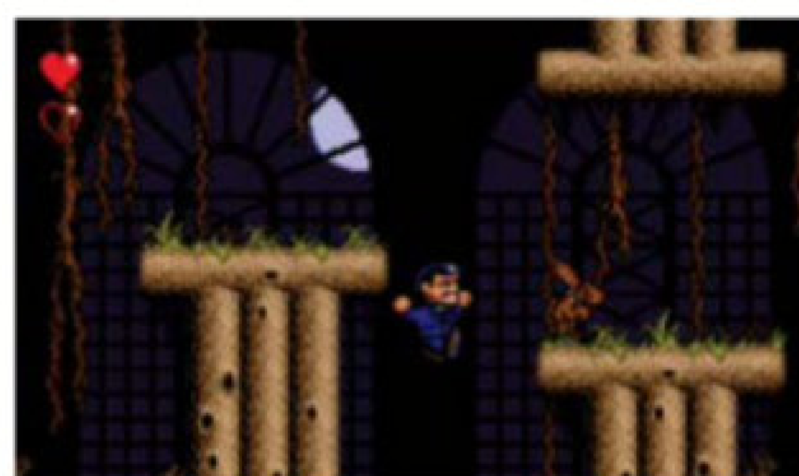
Ocean may have secured the lucrative Simpsons licence, but it failed to do anything exciting with it. It starts off promising enough with lots of smart references to the show, but the gameplay, which revolves around Bart foiling aliens by spray painting purple objects, soon gets tiresome and samey.



SMASH TV 1991

VARIOUS

Ocean's *Smash TV* conversion by Acclaim isn't bad, but it's far from perfect. While not every system was able to replicate the twin-stick method of the original, Ocean implemented it whenever it could. It's obviously nowhere near as slick to play when playing with a single stick and suffers in multiplayer as a result, but the C64 and Amiga versions do stand out as being fairly accurate, even if they pale in comparison to the stunning SNES port, also by Probe.



THE ADDAMS FAMILY 1992

VARIOUS

Ocean turned the popular film into a *Mario*-style platformer that had Gomez searching the huge grounds of his home for his missing family. It's a fun little game, particularly on the 16-bit systems, but never does anything to break the mould. Its success led to two more Ocean games, *Pugsley's Scavenger Hunt* and *Addams Family Values.*

EPIC 1992

VARIOUS

After its success with flight-sim F29 *Retaliator*, Digital Image Design turned its attention to sci-fi. The end result was a cheesy homage to *Star Wars*, *Star Trek* and *Battlestar Galactica* that has you shooting down enemy ships against space or planet backdrops. Heavily delayed, it received a mixed reception on release, but turned out to be a pretty fun *Wing Commander* clone.



SLEEPWALKER 1993

VARIOUS



This was the official game of Comic Relief and proved to be an inventive, if frustrating little platformer. The sleepwalker of the title is Lee, but you actually take control of his faithful dog Ralph, who must manipulate Lee and other household objects to ensure the young boy doesn't come to any harm while he sleeps.





JURASSIC PARK 1993

VARIOUS

Ocean got the chance to create *Jurassic Park* games for Nintendo's consoles, as well as home computers, while Sega secured the licences for other systems. All the versions are fun overhead adventure games, with a good mix of dinosaurs from the film. The SNES, Amiga and PC versions are particularly notable due to their first-person sections that have you trying to avoid some of the more dangerous dinos in enclosed, maze-like areas.

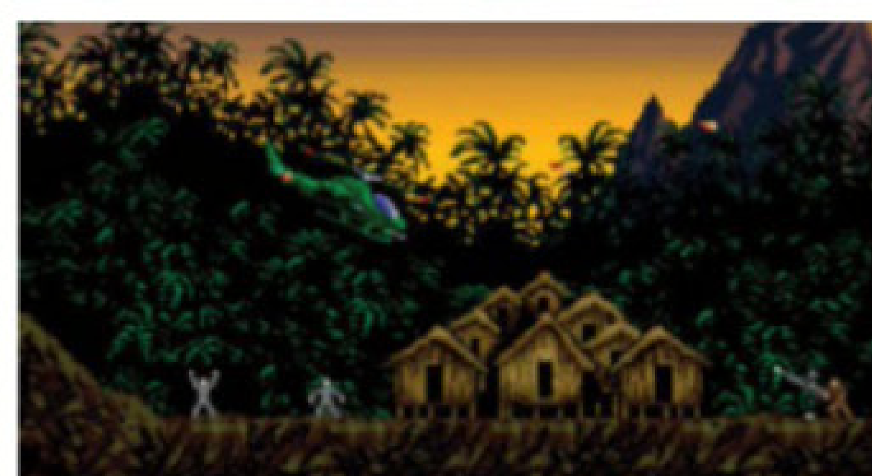


MR NUTZ: HOPPIN MAD 1994

VARIOUS

There's an insanely tough game underneath *Mr Nutz*'s sugary sweet exterior. It's clearly Ocean's answer to the anthropomorphic craze that was sweeping the console market during the Nineties and isn't bad at all, with you bottom-bouncing your way through the gorgeous looking levels and using your nuts to fend off incoming enemies. A standalone game, *Mr Nutz: Hoppin Mad* was released for the Amiga.





CHOPLIFTER III 1994

SNES

The third *Choplifter* is pretty much business as usual. Simply fly through the varied terrain while looking for a set number of POWs and destroying any nearby enemies. While the ability to get your helicopter recharged is a nice touch, many of the available weapons are quite weedy, giving you little impression that you're in a tooled-up attack chopper.

JELLY BOY 1995

SNES

Utterly bizarre platformer that has you playing a cute jelly baby that can punch with its stomach. He's also able to turn into a variety of useful items, ranging from pogo-sticks to cannons, which will enable him to traverse the trickily designed levels. Think *Mario* crossed with *Putty Squad* and you'll have a good idea of what to expect. Combine that with a weak, less polished version of *Kirby* and you'll be bang on the money.





SUPER TURRICAN 2 1995

SNES

Created by Factor 5, *Super Turrican 2* is a supercharged sequel to its 1992 hit. It's an utterly ridiculous blaster with judicious use of Mode 7 to create some truly outstanding bosses. While it lacks the wide open playing areas of the earlier *Turricans*, it feels far more focused thanks to tighter stage design and a handy *Bionic Commando*-styled grappling hook.

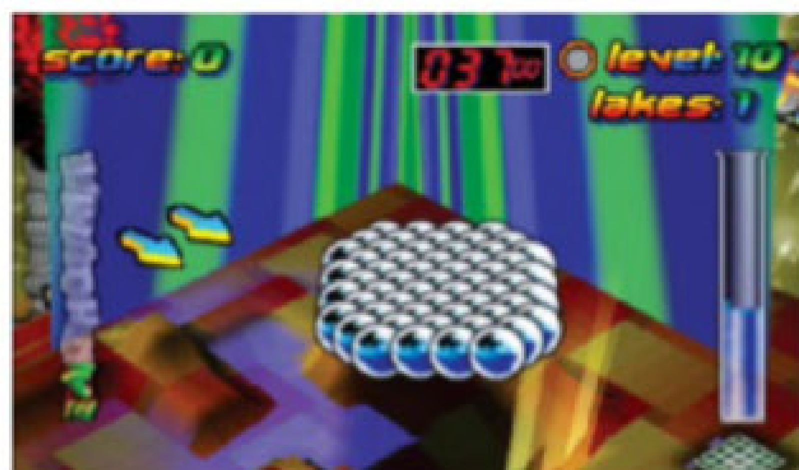




GT 64 CHAMPIONSHIP EDITION 1998

VARIOUS

While it's a nice enough looking racer, *GT 64* is painfully short when it comes to substance. The three tracks seem painfully stingy when compared to many other racers of the time, while the handling and car physics are rather weak. Two additional tracks are available on the Japanese version, but it's little consolation for such an uninspired racer.



WETRIX 1998

VARIOUS

Ocean's penultimate game is a clever puzzle game. *Tetris*-style blocks fall to the ground, which will raise or lower its elevation, allowing you to fill the holes you've created with water. You then evaporate collected pools with fireballs for points. It's a tremendous little game that deserves a sequel.

MISSION IMPOSSIBLE 1998

N64, PLAYSTATION

Loosely based on the film, Ocean's last game is a ropey third-person action game with decent ideas (some sections will punish you for killing enemies) but poor execution. Planned as a SNES game, coding moved over to the N64. The result is a messy game: stodgy controls, irritating camera views and truly abysmal visuals.





BEST OF THE REST

Ocean released a staggering number of games. Here are our top picks

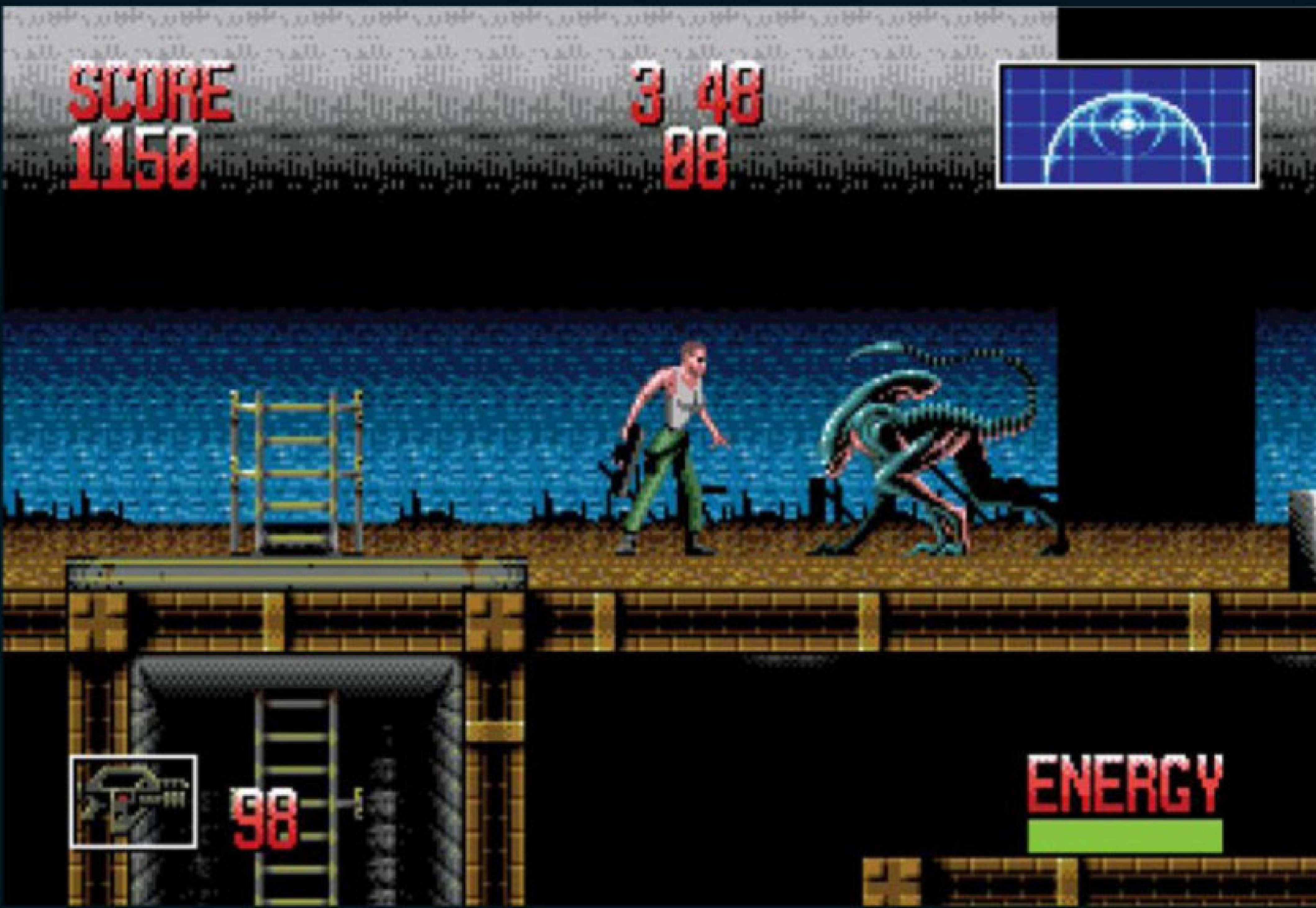
- ARMAGEDDON (1983)
- POGO (1983)
- ESKIMO EDDIE (1984)
- HIGH NOON (1984)
- SPELLBOUND (1984)
- KONG 2: KONG STRIKES BACK (1985)
- DALEY THOMPSON'S SUPERTEST (1985)
- RAMBO: FIRST BLOOD PART II (1985)
- HUNCHBACK 2: QUASIMODO'S REVENGE (1986)
- PARALLAX (1986)
- MARIO BROS (1987)
- MATCH DAY 2 (1987)
- TAI-PAN (1987)
- ECO: A GAME OF SURVIVAL (1987)
- PHANTOM CLUB (1988)
- TRACK & FIELD (1988)
- DALEY THOMPSON'S OLYMPIC CHALLENGE (1988)
- RUN THE GAUNTLET (1989)
- F29 – RETALIATOR (1989)
- ROBOCOP 2 (1990)
- PUZZNIC (1990)
- NIGHT BREED (1990)
- THE LOST PATROL (1990)
- LIQUID KIDS (1990)
- BAD DUDES VS DRAGON NINJA (1990)
- THE LEGEND OF BILLY THE KID (1991)
- TERMINATOR 2: JUDGEMENT DAY (1991)
- ROBOCOP 3 (1992)
- A-TRAIN (1992)
- SPACE GUN (1992)
- PARASOL STARS: RAINBOW ISLANDS II (1992)
- SUPER HUNCHBACK (1992)
- WIZKID (1992)
- PUSH OVER (1992)
- MR DO! (1992)
- TFX (1993)
- INFERNO (1994)
- THE ADVENTURES OF MIGHTY MAX (1994)
- EEK! THE CAT (1994)
- KID CHAOS (1994)
- SOCCER KID (1994)
- POCKY & ROCKY 2 (1995)
- ADDAMS FAMILY VALUES (1995)
- TRUE PINBALL (1996)
- WORMS: THE DIRECTOR'S CUT (1997)
- TRANSPORT TYCOON (1997)
- FIGHTERS DESTINY (1998)
- I-WAR (1998)



BEHIND THE SCENES

ALIEN³

We speak to the guys behind two of the finest movie adaptations of the 16-bit era about the challenges of turning a flop movie into a great game





Released: 1992 (MD), 1993 (SNES)
Format: Mega Drive, SNES (Other versions available)
Publisher: Virgin / Arena / LJN / Acclaim
Key Staff: Tim Round (Programmer, Mega Drive), Jow Bonar (Producer, Mega Drive), Matt Furniss (Music, Mega Drive), Nick Jones (Programmer, SNES), Nick Bruty (Graphics, SNES), Tony Beckwith (Producer, SNES), Steve Collett (Music, SNES)



DAVID FINCHER MAY have an enviable body of work behind him, what with the likes of *Fight Club*, *The Curious Case Of Benjamin Button* and – more recently – *Gone Girl*, but the film with which he began his career isn't considered to be such a classic. That's hardly surprising when you consider that 1992's *Alien 3* had such a tortured production; Fincher was drafted in at the last moment and when the cameras eventually started rolling the film didn't even have a completed script. Fincher has since disowned this rather turgid piece of celluloid, and while fans of the sci-fi franchise may continue to bemoan its third outing, something positive did come out of *Alien 3* – namely the videogame adaptations which accompanied its cinematic launch. Ripley's interactive battle against bloodthirsty xenomorphs would grace systems like the C64, Game Boy and Master System, but it is the Mega Drive and SNES versions which remain the most fondly remembered by fans today.

As was usual for the time, UK studio Probe Software decided against creating a single game and releasing it on both 16-bit platforms; while both versions of *Alien 3* follow the same basic template – a run-and-gun shooter with exploration elements – they would be entirely unique from one another in practically every regard and were created by different teams in the UK. The Mega Drive version is perhaps the one which is most famous by virtue of the fact that it launched before its SNES counterpart in 1992, with programming duties being sub-contracted to Eden Software. "I started out as a games programmer in 1988 working for Elite Systems," says former Eden staffer Tim Round today. "I then moved to Arc Developments, where I worked on various arcade games including *Forgotten Worlds* and R-Type II. In 1991 I started Eden Entertainment Software with fellow Arc staffer Stuart Middleton. Our first contract was going to be *Chuck Rock* for Core Design, but that fell through, and we had already handed in our notices with Arc, so we ended up talking to Probe about some contract work. I remember at the time the producer asking us what our favourite movie was and we both answered *Aliens*, so it was really funny they were offering us a chance to work on an *Alien* game. We were given the responsibility of coding the Mega Drive version – Probe provided us with graphics, we worked together on the design."

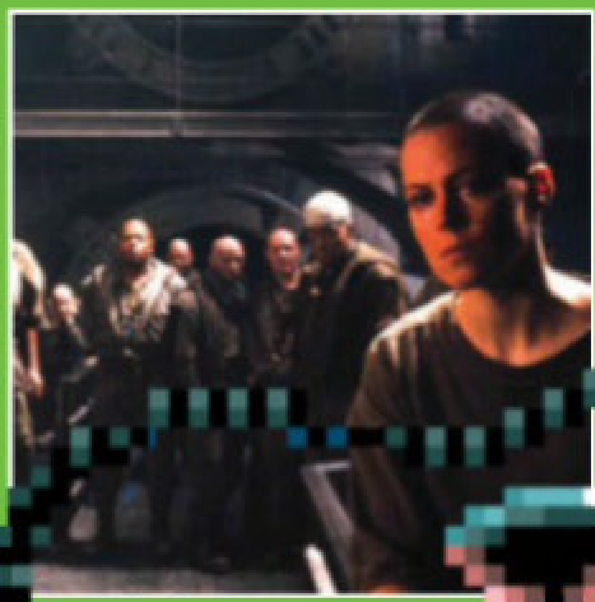
Around the same time, Nick Jones – who had worked on titles such as *Stormlord* and *Cybernoid* – began conceptualising the SNES version. Since *Alien 3*, Jones' career has taken him to the States where he famously worked on *Earthworm Jim* at Shiny and, like Round, he was bitten by the development bug early. "I knew when I was at school that I wanted to make videogames; not necessarily as a career because the games industry wasn't really established at that time," he recounts. "I was obsessed with videogames after seeing the likes of *Space Invaders* and *Galaxians*.



FAMILY FEED-BACK

The only person at Fox interested in it was an exec's kid

■ WHEN YOU CONSIDER how 20th Century Fox's interfering executives succeeded in scuppering any chance of the *Alien 3* movie being a hit with fans, it's perhaps surprising to learn that the company was much less concerned about how the games would turn out. "I do remember getting some feedback from an executive's son who played it, but we didn't really have any direct contact with anyone connected to the movie," recalls Tim Round. "All we had was a script and some photos and drawings." Nick Jones had even less to go on. "We had very little input. We got the script early on and we were given a few still shots from the movie a few months later; perhaps about 15-20 photos. Bruty worked magic with those photos and created all of the art for the backgrounds."



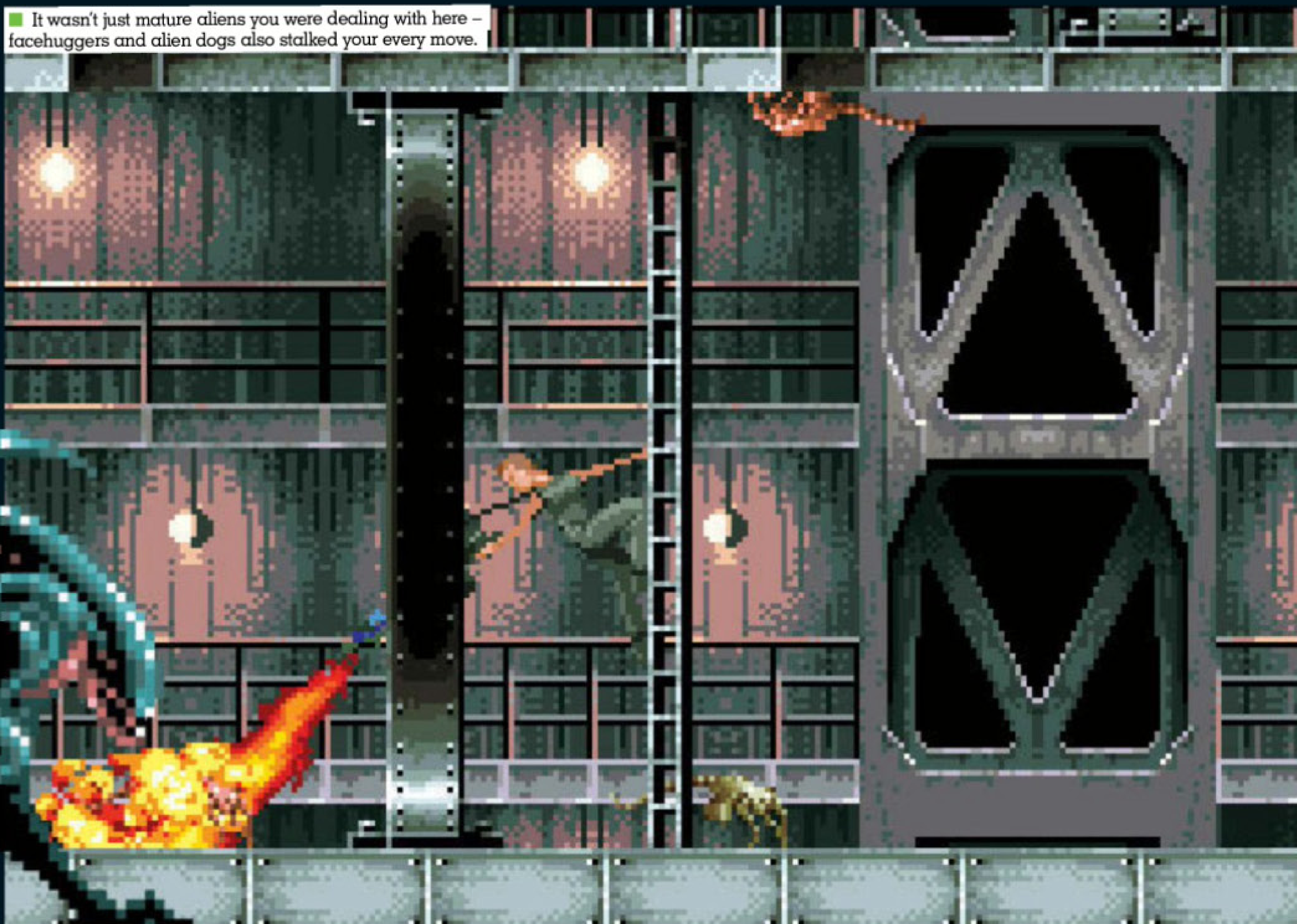
So around 1982, I bought an Oric-1. I hardly knew anything about computers. I figured out how to program it in machine code. I'd get snippets of information from my school friends or through computer magazines, and then figured out how to control the hardware through a lot of trial and error, and many late nights."

As was the case with Eden Software, Probe subcontracted Jones' company Spearsoft to work on the SNES version of *Alien 3*. "I was contracted to do the programming and Nick Bruty was contracted to do the graphics," he explains. "The producer initially at Probe was Neil Young. He left Probe early on and Tony Beckwith took over as the producer. Neil, Nick and myself came up with the first rough idea for the game. We spent a weekend in Wales trying to figure it out. I just remember a lot of arguing. Probe had a tools guy called Carl Mueller and he supplied a level editor called Crisp. Once the game engine was done, a lot of the levels were created by another guy in Whitby using the Crisp tool. The final game design was a combination of myself and Tony."

It was around this time that the console war between Sega and Nintendo was really hotting up, and the Mega Drive and SNES were both arguably hitting their respective strides. Both Jones and Round had cut their teeth on home computers, and the raw processing power on tap with the latest Japanese consoles was intoxicating. "The SNES was simply mind-blowing," Jones admits. "We'd all been working on the ZX Spectrum and C64 before this. The C64 was amazing but was nothing compared to the SNES. When I first signed up to do the game, I had only heard the rumours about what the machine could do; screen rotation, four layers of backgrounds that could be added, subtracted or merged with each other; huge colour palettes and many sprites on the screen, and a mass of memory. The final machine wasn't far off what I had heard."

That's not to say that Sega's console was lacking. "There was the obvious comparison to the Mega Drive," Jones continues. "They were very similar machines. They had very similar screen modes, usually having the same-sized ROMS. Overall, the SNES had clearer graphics, much better colour palette capabilities, more screen modes – including the Mode 7 rotating screen – and sample-based audio. The Mega Drive had a faster processor, a slightly higher resolution screen, more flexibility in how it drew sprites, and a synthesizer." Not that Jones had to concern himself with Sega's hardware during *Alien 3*'s development, of course. That responsibility lay with Round, who found that the Mega Drive's connection with his programming past helped considerably. "It was nice to be using the same chip – the 68000 – as the ST and Amiga. I loved working on the Mega Drive; its still my favourite console."

Both Round and Jones are massive fans of the *Alien* movie franchise, and understandably the allure of creating a videogame based on this series was considerable. "I was crazy for the original *Alien* movie," Jones admits. "I was a really young kid when it was being made and read about the development of the movie through the Daily Mirror. I was fascinated by it. I didn't see the first movie until I was in my late teens but I did read the book. I was absolutely blown away by the first two movies. Nick Bruty was an absolute fan too." However, both were bitterly disappointed by *Alien 3* as a film. "As soon



It wasn't just mature aliens you were dealing with here – facehuggers and alien dogs also stalked your every move.



WHAT THEY SAID...



Alien 3 is an extremely polished, highly enjoyable blasting/ exploration game. I strongly recommend you take a look at it as soon as possible.

Mean Machines, 1992

as I read the first page of the script and discovered they had killed off Newt and Hicks, I knew this movie was going to be a disappointment," says Round. "In its defence, the movie is OK on its own – I just think its a really bad sequel to *Aliens*." Jones has equally dismal memories. "We did get to see a preview of the movie a few months before it came out, which was about halfway through the game's development if I remember correctly. After the movies *Alien* and *Aliens* – which were massive – we thought that *Alien 3* was going to be amazing. We left the preview [feeling] quite disappointed."

One of the big issues with the third *Alien* film is that it tries – and fails – to recreate to the tension of the Ridley Scott original by removing the formidable arsenal of weapons introduced by James Cameron's 1986 gung-ho sequel, *Aliens*. In the film, Ripley doesn't have access to Pulse Rifles or flamethrowers, and this created a unique issue for the designers of the videogame adaptations. "Our first attempt at coming up with a game concept in Wales centred around whether we should be faithful to the movie and have just one alien and no guns, or to go with the theme of the Cameron *Aliens* movie – many aliens, guns and explosions," Jones recalls. "I have to say that Neil and Nick were very much for the 'one alien' approach and I wanted to get away from that. I just couldn't visualise how it would be fun." Creative Assembly's recent *Alien: Isolation* proves that it is possible to make a successful *Alien* game with a single foe, but given the relative limitations of 16-bit tech, Jones is adamant that he made the right choice back in the early Nineties. "I still think it was the right move to make. I was just sad I couldn't get Ripley using the Exoskeleton into the game – there was no more time or memory."

Round admits that in terms of the Sega version, the choice was a very simple one. "We decided pretty early on we needed to keep the guns and to have more than one alien, and 20th Century Fox agreed. We just kept the prison location and made it about rescuing prisoners."

Interestingly, despite the fact that both versions of *Alien 3* adhered to the well-worn action platformer template, Probe initially wanted something a little more unique. "During development we had to argue for using tried-and-tested platform game mechanics," Round reveals. "Probe wanted the game to be totally original and they didn't want to use any ideas from other games. It took a lot of convincing to get them to add things like pick-ups and moving lifts, but I must admit I did like the ventilation ducts."

IT TOOK A LOT OF CONVINCING TO GET THEM TO ADD THINGS LIKE PICK-UPS

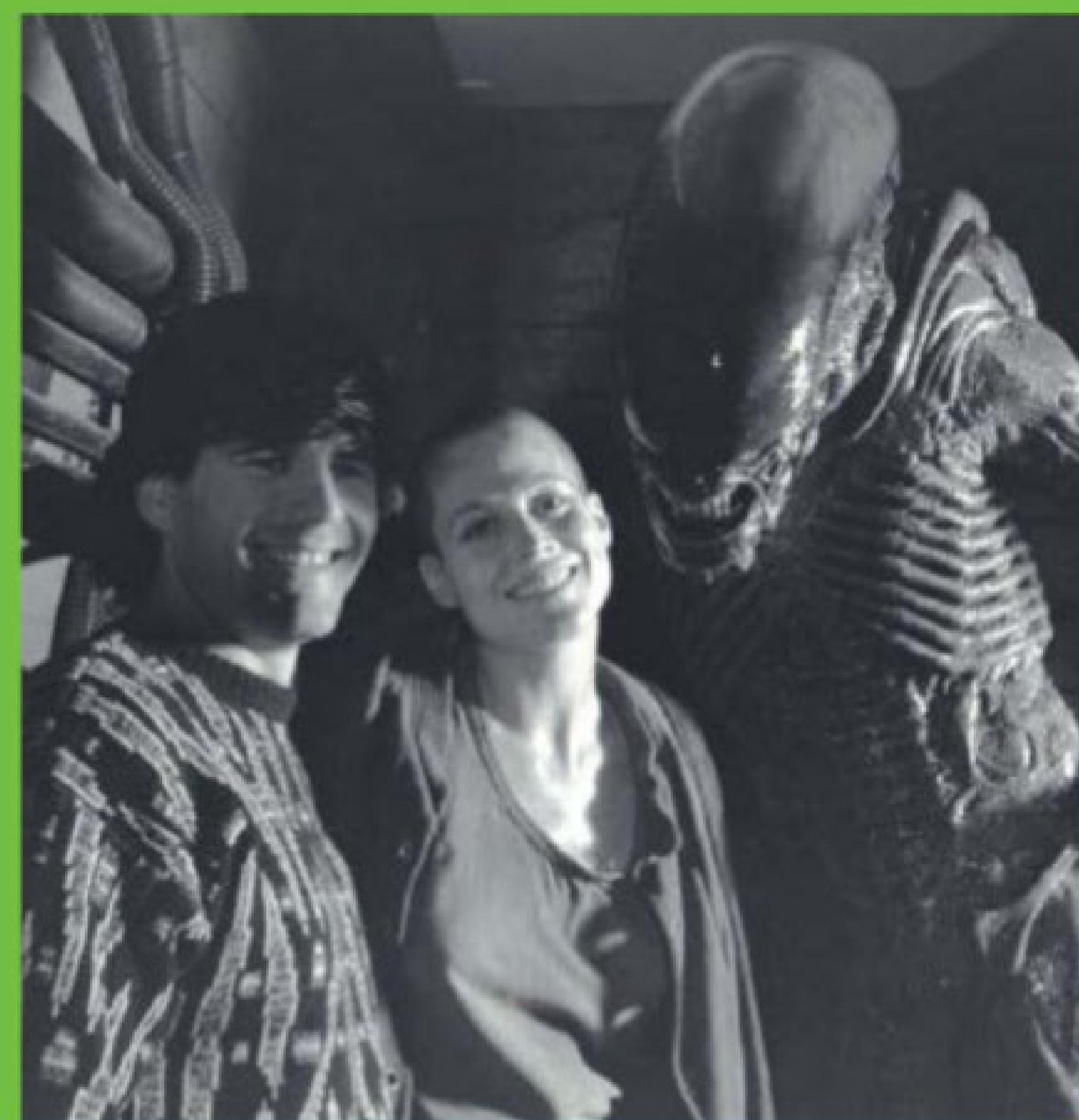
A common feature in the movies, these ducts allowed aliens to stalk their prey more effectively, and in the game led to some memorable face-offs as the player found themselves getting up-close and personal with their enemy in a confined space on more one occasion. While the two games shared many traits – air ducts and prisoners being just two – there were key differences between them. The focus of the Sega edition was rescuing prisoners against a strict time limit, while the SNES game built on this concept by adding mission objectives which changed from level to level.

As they were sub-contracted to Probe, neither Round nor Jones had any contact with one another during the development period, despite the fact that they were working on what was essentially the same project. "We knew nothing about the Mega Drive version," Jones admits. "I was simply focused on the SNES and pulling off as many cool tricks with the machine as I could." Jones reveals that despite the lack of communication, he and his team were aware

FINCHER'S FOLLY

Alien 3's game was great, but the film itself is harder to defend

■ DEVELOPMENT ON THE third *Alien* film began almost as soon as James Cameron's *Aliens* posted bumper ticket sales at the box office in 1986, and early on there was talk of Ridley Scott returning as director. Cyberpunk author William Gibson was brought in to create an initial script, but left when producers wanted rewrites. The film's story underwent further evolution, with director Vincent Ward, whose innovative ideas met with the approval of Sigourney Weaver, who wanted to avoid another firepower-heavy action film and had only signed up on the proviso that Ripley would be killed off at its conclusion. 20th Century Fox wasn't convinced by this storyline and when Ward refused to change, he was fired. Walter Hill and David Giler were given the task of pulling the screenplay back into shape, and David Fincher was hastily employed as director. Fincher found the script needed more work, and juggled shooting duties with fine-tuning the script. The end result is predictably a mess; reviews were mixed and the box office return was disappointing. While many failed movies are worthy of reassessment many years on, Alien 3 may never experience its cultural rebirth – it's a dark, nonsensical and often downright dull way to spend two hours of your time, and it's little wonder that Fincher himself effectively disowned it.



WHAT THEY SAID...



Alien 3 is a huge, sprawling game of blinking toughorama proportions, and is one even the most battle-weary of kill-merchants should nab as soon as possible.

Nintendo Magazine System, 1993

that Eden Software was cooking up something special on Sega's system, and that the two games would ultimately be compared to one another. "I never had any doubt that we'd have the better game," Jones continues with a grin. "But not knowing what the competition is doing certainly keeps you on your toes."

Cartridge storage space was a common headache for all developers of the period, but Spearsoft hit a brick wall on more than one occasion. The issue was that the visuals Nick Bruty was generating were simply too good. "Nick was creating the animations for Ripley and he always went over budget in the number of frames he could use," Jones says. "For example, I was expecting a six-frame run cycle for Ripley and he would give me a 16-frame run cycle. The animations were too beautiful to chop down so I just kept using them, all at the expense of memory. I only had about 2MB memory and soon ran out." Thankfully, the slickness of the animation had the desired effect and actually ended up solving its own problem, in a sense. "20th Century Fox saw an early version of the game," Jones continues. "They liked it and decided they wanted to double the cartridge size, so Nick and I went into negotiations with them to double the size of the game. We managed to wrangle a little more money for ourselves but in reality, we desperately needed that memory anyway." Even by today's standards the SNES version of *Alien 3* exhibits some exquisite animation, vindicating Bruty's perfectionist approach.

Jones is incredibly proud of what he and his team achieved with the SNES version of *Alien 3*. When asked to list his most memorable achievements, he quickly reels off a long list. "Managing to complete the game; fitting all of Nick graphics into the game, especially his animations; the ability for Ripley to do many of her actions and fire any of her three weapons at any time; the flamethrower and its capability to



■ The SNES version used a unique mission-based structure where Ripley could access terminals to take on new objectives [SNES]

interact with any background and create a blowback of flames wherever it hit the walls; the blueprints which actually used the real maps but with small tiles that were coloured blue; the music which seamlessly

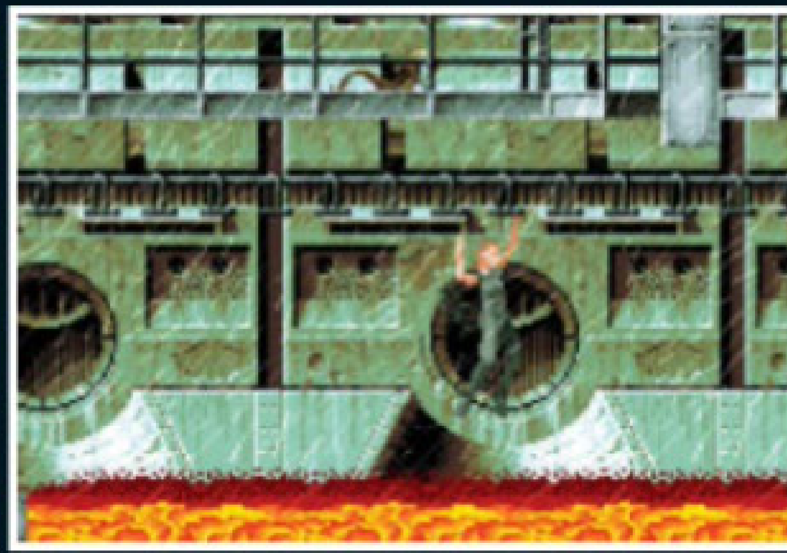
> **THE ANIMATIONS WERE TOO BEAUTIFUL TO CUT DOWN SO I KEPT USING THEM, ALL AT THE EXPENSE OF MEMORY**

switched between theme tune and tense action via the use of an internal software slider. But particularly the second and third layers of screens to create atmosphere and special effects. Also, I loved the intro; it really captured the essence of the movie." For Round, he's proudest of the way his team were able to pull together the Mega Drive version towards the end of the development period. "The game did start to come together really late in the day – early versions weren't really that playable. The game evolved quite a bit during development,

> A GAMING EVOLUTION Contra > Alien 3 > Alien Trilogy



Konami refined the run-and-gun template with this classic arcade blaster, and both types of *Alien 3* borrowed from it.



Probe's next *Alien* title was a *Doom*-style shooter, but it kept the foreboding atmosphere of *Alien 3* intact.

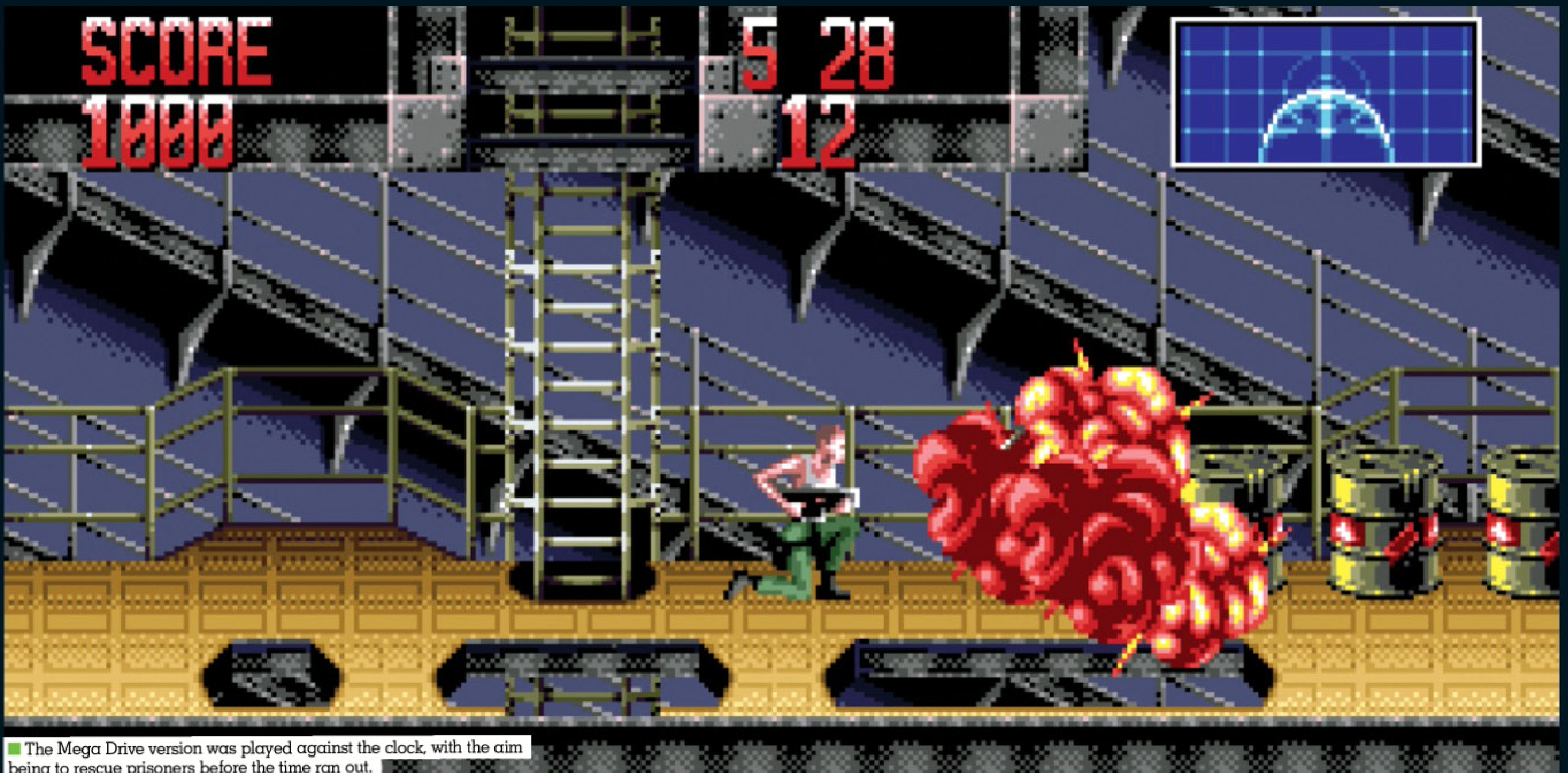


but in the end it turned into a fun and playable game. I did enjoy coding the end of level bosses, as well as the grenades and exploding barrels."

Both Round and Jones are proud of what they achieved, but they will freely admit that neither game is truly perfect. In the case of the SNES edition, Jones believes that he could have made it more fast-paced. "I wish it was more twitch-based," he laments. "Looking at it now, the character moves too slowly and you don't have enough control once she jumps. Otherwise, I look back at the game and am still pretty happy with it." For Round, he wishes that he could have taken and refined more elements from traditional run-and-gun shooters of the period, such as *Contra* and *Midnight Resistance*. Irrespective of these thoughts, both versions received positive reviews and are well-remembered even today – a neat twist when you consider what dim a view history has taken of the Fincher film which inspired them. The reaction from press and gamers alike made it all worthwhile for Jones. "For me, I'd be super-focused on creating the best game I could," he says. "The reward was to see the final product in a box on the store shelves and to see the reviews coming in through magazines. I would save as many as I could find." We doubt that David Fincher did the same when the first reviews of *Alien 3* the movie rolled in.



A familiar sight to any *Alien 3* fan. Both games were tough as nails, so failure was a common event.



The Mega Drive version was played against the clock, with the aim being to rescue prisoners before the time ran out.

THE NATIONAL VIDEOGAME ARCADE'S



SOME OF THE AMAZING VIDEOGAME HISTORY AND ACTIVITIES YOU ABSOLUTELY HAVE TO CHECK OUT AT THE NEW NOTTINGHAM INSTALLATION

NOTTINGHAM HAS BECOME THE ANNUAL HOME OF THE VIDEOGAME FESTIVAL GAMECITY FOR THE PAST TEN YEARS. TODAY, IT IS THE LOCATION OF THE NATIONAL VIDEOGAME ARCADE, THE BRAINCHILD OF CO-DIRECTORS IAIN SIMONS AND JONATHAN SMITH, THE FORMER HEAD OF TT GAMES. IT HOPES TO ATTRACT 60,000 VISITORS A YEAR, BUT ITS MAIN AIM IS TO CHANGE THE IDEA OF WHAT GAMES CAN BE



The masterminds behind the new museum to gaming history.

1 GAMING HISTORY IN 100 OBJECTS

The history of videogames is rich and complex, a tangled web of culture and technology that transcends geographical boundaries. To encapsulate such a past in a single room – even one as large as that of the one that exists at the National Videogame Arcade – is a daunting task. Yet this part of the NVA is a success, bringing wonderful and varied gaming objects together in an eclectic mix of old and new. Far from being a definitive timeline, it's an intriguing sample of how gaming has grown over the years. There is a ZX Spectrum signed by *Manic Miner* creator Matthew Smith, a board game made by MB Games based on *Defender* and a copy of Ian Livingstone's five-part adventure game *Eureka*, which is 250k of pure mystery.

This room also contains an original Atari 2600 game cartridge of *ET The Extra-Terrestrial* (many of which infamously ended up in a Mexican desert landfill), a BBC Micro, a NES, a Sega Master System and Mega Drive. Videogames have had a relatively



Everything from magazine cover to gaming branded soft drinks are here.

short history of a handful of decades so far; also gracing the display we found more modern gaming devices, including a PS3, PSP, and a Wii wheel peripheral.

The curators intend to regularly swap items to keep this exhibit fresh. "Children are interested in new things to them and a lot of stuff that falls under the category of retro gaming stuff has never been seen before by children," says Jonathan Smith. "So the process of working out how to play *Jet Set Willy* on a Spectrum keyboard is fun and interesting to a seven-year-old."



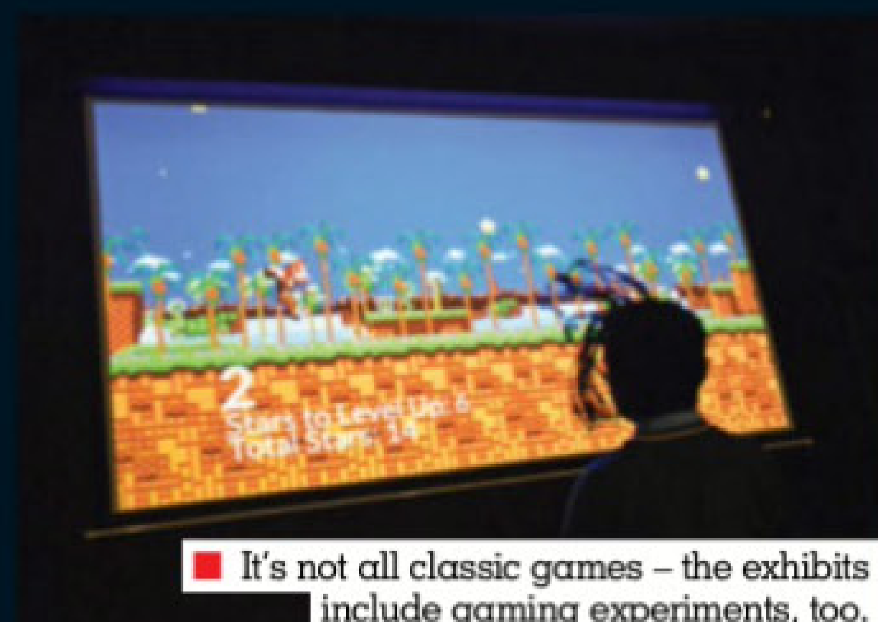
2 ARCADE CABINETS

Dotted around the NVA are a selection of arcade coin-op cabinets, including one of the 359 different button-bashing *Track And Field* machines made by Konami and the 1981 Nintendo classic *Donkey Kong*, which sits in its own room beneath a pixelated piece of wall art of Donkey himself.

These games fit perfectly with the museum's 'Jump!' exhibition, which seeks to examine the history and spirit of jumping in videogames. The NVA will change its exhibition programme four times a year, but 'Jump!' is kick-starting proceedings. In *Donkey Kong*, perfectly executed leaps are needed to perfect the game and achieve a high score – not that Donkey is the only reference to characters at the Arcade. Pac-Man, Sonic the Hedgehog and Agent 4125 from *Impossible Mission* are among those on display. "We want to inspire people with the breadth of what videogames can be," says Smith. "Most people have a game that they like and may love, whether it's *FIFA* or *Call Of Duty* or memories of *Defender*. We want to remind everyone that there is a wealth of unexplored country out there."

3 THE JUMP-O-TRON

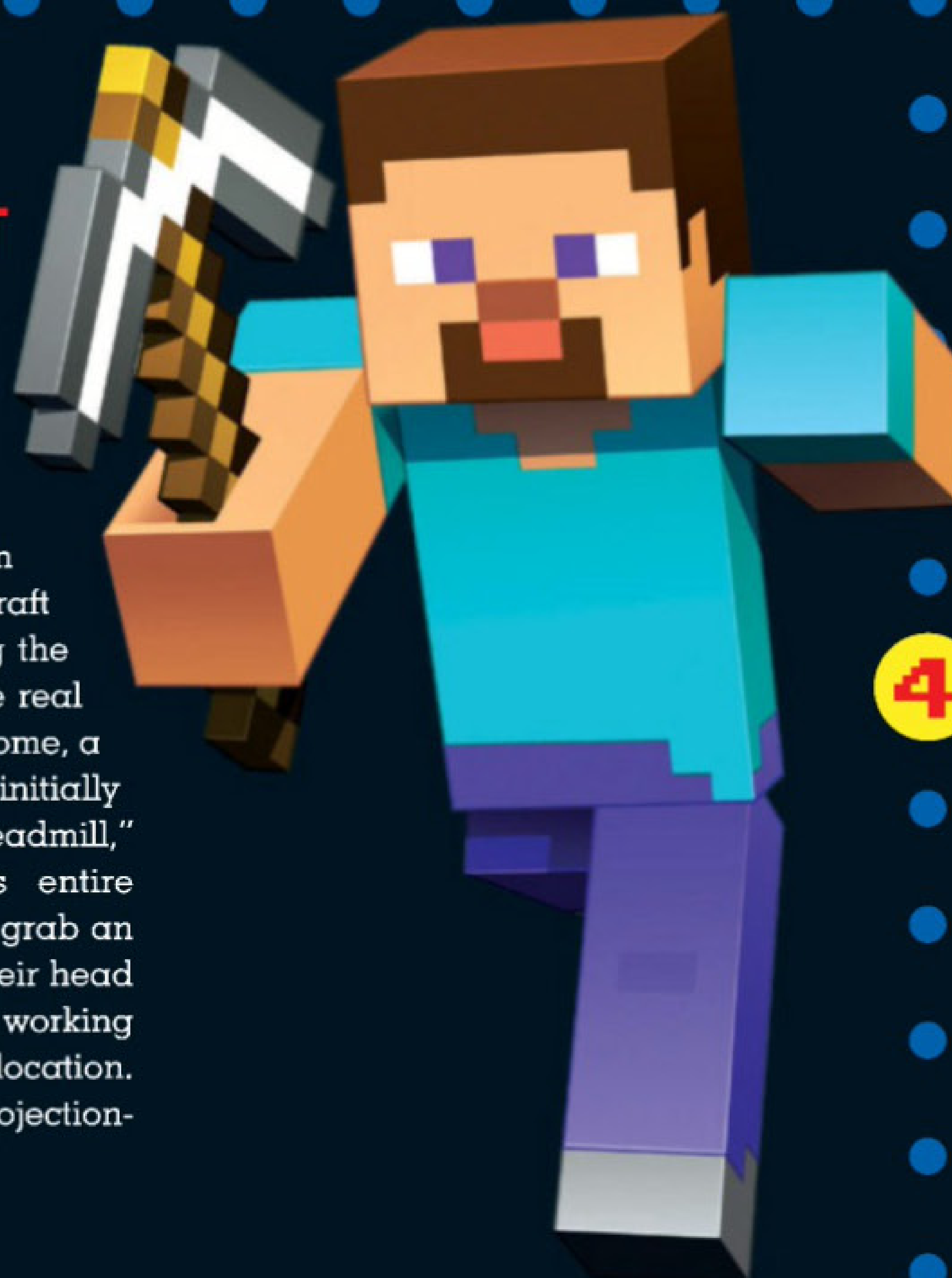
Most intriguing, though, is the Jump-o-Tron, an antique, retro-looking contraption that lets users alter the mass, gravity, trajectory and properties of a jump before performing it and getting a printed receipt of the triumph. If you thought the palm sweat during frantic joystick-waggling sessions of old was bad, it's got nothing on the energetic jumps needed to make the most of this exhibit.



It's not all classic games – the exhibits include gaming experiments, too.

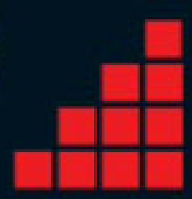
4 THE MINECRAFT ROOM

Minecraft has proved itself to be an instant classic, a game that looks set to have a lasting effect on players for years to come. The Minecraft Room is a noble attempt at blurring the boundaries between games and the real world by running it within a ZONE Dome, a five-foot-wide curved screen. "It was initially created to fit to the front of a gym treadmill," says Simons. It fills a player's entire peripheral vision, so gamers who grab an Xbox 360 controller and stick their head within the dome feel as if they working their way through a virtual location. The effects are created by projection-mapping software.





The arcade is a great place for younger gamers to experience classic games.



ROOM RACERS

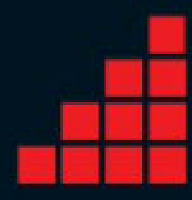
Codemasters' top-down tiny racing game *Micro Machines* was a Nineties smash hit. Based on a popular range of toys, gamers would race little cars across multiple wacky tracks, roaring around a breakfast table, avoiding bottles of ketchup and trying not to splat through an egg. Room Racers effectively brings the game to life, allowing players to place physical inanimate objects on the floor before racing virtual, controllable cars around them. If a real sieve or a tennis racket is in the way, the cars will bash into them and grind to a halt. It's all made possible by a combination of an overhead projector and a camera fixed to the ceiling that detects the objects, and it's a superb example of how videogames do not necessarily have to be about what happens on-screen.



Now you can get a car-eye view of what the *Micro Machines* experience is really like.

6

MISSION CONTROL



Mission Control has been created by Nottingham Trent University computer science graduate Alex Roberts, who is working as an engineer at the NVA. Her installation fills an entire room, allowing two players to grab N64 controllers and pilot spacecrafts. Up to ten players can alter the gameplay by changing the colours, text, nature and rules of the game. Players can also create drawings and scan them into the game in real-time, their imagery subsequently forming part of the experience.

Not only does this allow the players to become gaming artists, it gives them a feel for the individual elements of a game. Roberts wanted players to appreciate how tweaking gameplay and rules can enhance or detract from a game and how developers often spend many hours, days and months making adjustments. "We really like to expose the hardware with Mission Control to see how the switches connect and what they are connected to so that there is some transparency," says Roberts.



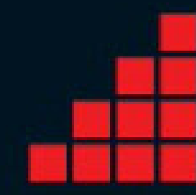
There's a real Science Museum vibe to how this has all been put together.

7



Education is a massive part of what the NVA is trying to offer its visitors.

FUTURE GAME MAKERS



A top-floor area of the five-storey NVA is set aside for education. Youngsters can learn to code with Raspberry Pis, Flash and Unity, take part in workshops and attend talks and activities. The UK has the largest games development community in Europe, with around 2,000 gaming companies, but the NVA hopes to boost those numbers by explaining the benefits of a career in videogaming. "We're trying to teach curiosity by setting up the right contexts and rewarding people for experimentation," says Jonathan Smith. "If you don't do that, you forget how to be curious, which is what happens when you become an adult."

THE GAME INSPECTOR

A key theme underpinning the NVA's ethos is a determination to get players under the hood of gaming and see how titles are put together.

The Game Inspector is a robust piece of moulded plastic with a joystick, two buttons and three switches on a metal body. It allows gamers to zoom in and out of levels in *Super Mario Bros* or *Sonic The Hedgehog*; it's possible to see any part of the game.

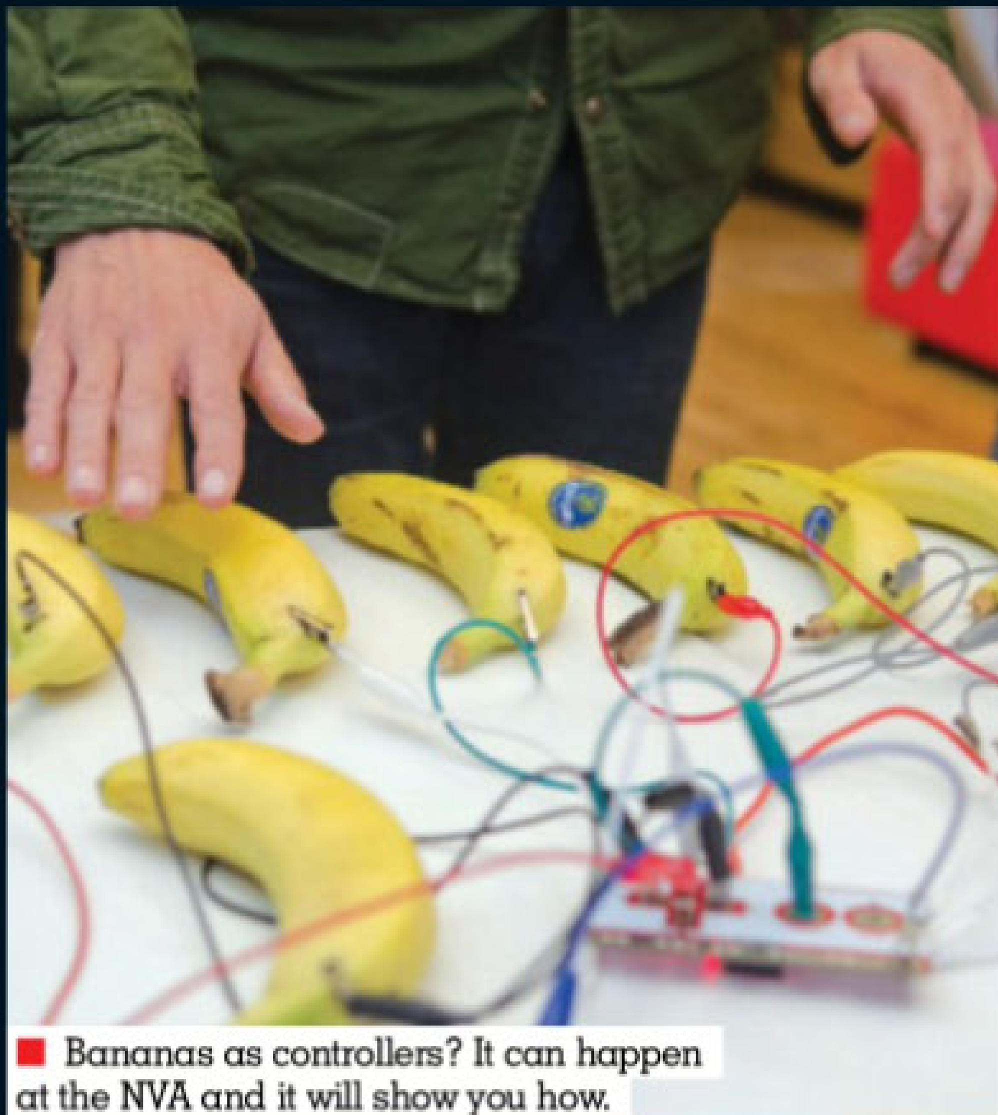
"We've come up with a different way of visualising and making sense of games," says professor James Newman, who worked on the device. "It's based around maps and looking at the level design, places where you jump and how the game has been put together to let you perform those jumps. You can see the game in a way that you wouldn't normally see it when you are playing."

Part of this is the interactive 'Jump!' exhibit with a huge game of *Canabalt*, the retro-inspired runner game created by Adam Saltsman in 2009. The game is played on two screens by four players jumping up and down on sensor pads on the ground.

There's also a Wall of Jumps, eight screens that examine the art of the jump, double jump and wall jump. "People may not know about these types," says Simons. "So we are showing instances of games that people recognise – they are simple, prototypes that gently increasing anybody's ability to think and talk about games together." Powered by eight computers and eight controllers connected to the open source bare bones computer Arduino. It's studies the way a character jumps and relates it to the real world.


There are all sorts of ways of interacting with games beyond just playing them.

8


Bananas as controllers? It can happen at the NVA and it will show you how.

THE HALL OF INPUTS

For years, people played games using a computer keyboard, joystick or gamepad, but many attempts have been made to provide a more immersive and intuitive method of control. The Nintendo Wii Remote is perhaps the most well-known departure from traditional input methods for most of the visitors to the NVA, but the Hall of Inputs explores the theme much further, adding off-the-wall peripherals such as the *Donkey Konga* bongos to the mix and more recent additions such as Kinect.

Visitors are also encouraged to fashion controllers out of fruit and play games by tapping on real-life bananas. This makes use of the inexpensive MaKey MaKey system, which raised $568,106 on KickStarter in 2012 and allows everyday objects to be turned into input devices. "You are just completing a circuit," says Iain. "It empowers people not to just code but make stuff too. It's about doing and soldering and it's important for the spirit of things. People can take their banana controllers and play on machines like Mission Control." It's about making people conscious of the various ways games can be interacted with and the effects actions can have.

9



The National Videogame Arcade is a pretty amazing new celebration of UK gaming.

THE LONGPLAY LOUNGE

10

The LongPlay Lounge lets visitors relax and directly play some games, but it has laid down a few rules that actively try to counter-balance the dark, dusty and competitive videogame arcades of old. Users are asked to refrain from hogging the games, to play nice and stick to groups of four or less, and avoid the temptation to show off. "It's a really nice setup that lets you sit down and a play a game in your own time," says Simons. "We were mindful of creating those 'safe areas' for players in the building."



RETRO

INTERVIEW

MARTIN HOLLIS

We speak to the creator of one of the most advanced Nintendo 64 games about its inception, creation and reception, some 15 years after its original release

SELECT GAMEOGRAPHY



Killer Instinct (1994)
Technical programmer



GoldenEye 007 (1997)
Director



Perfect Dark (2000)
Project lead

***Perfect Dark* was supposed to be *GoldenEye*'s successor, but we've heard you turned down the pitch for *Tomorrow Never Dies* instantly?**

Well, yes, I did, but of course at the time it wasn't known as *Tomorrow Never Dies*; it's like the films – they'll only ever call it 'Bond 17' or 'Bond 18' and so on. We knew the project was supposed to be tied into the next Bond film, and after completing *GoldenEye*, I had absolutely no feeling that I wanted to go back to that [franchise]. I'm a massive fan of the films – watching the films in their entirety over countless Christmases – but three years of being loving and faithful to that universe felt enough. Any longer on a Bond project wouldn't have been creatively interesting to me; it wasn't a long debate, turning it down. I said to [programmer David Doak] 'I don't want to go back' and he agreed and that was it.

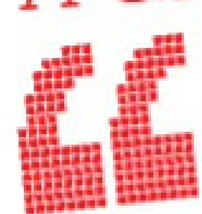
***Perfect Dark* has a got a much more sci-fi feeling to it – similar in tone to *Do Androids Dream Of Electric Sheep?* – where did that direction come from?**

So you're referencing the Philip K. Dick short story there, but is it really that similar? Well, I'll tell you a story – when myself and [studio head] Mark Bettridge used to do the interviews for new staff, we had a series of questions (a lot of them were very programming specific – what's 2 to the power 16 and all that), but one of the questions was 'What's your favourite film?' We pretty much had the view that if someone said *Blade Runner*, that was the right answer [laughs]. If they didn't say that… well, it was a point of score against them.

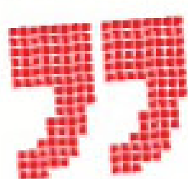
WE DID OUR BEST TO MAKE JOANNA DARK A STRONG CHARACTER… NOT A GOTH BUT [SHE] CERTAINLY FAVOURS DARK COLOURS

So the *GoldenEye* team was a huge fan of Ridley Scott, and I've personally been a fan of Philip K. Dick for many years, as was Doak. I think his interest extended into the 'magical powers' that kind of sci-fi could allow; telekinesis, mind control and such, you know, the metaphysical stuff. He liked things you could do in a game that were super-human,

A GAME MAKER'S PROCESS



I TEND TO play games in a strange way; with the goal of learning how they're engineered, how they're architected. I try and see into the decision-making of the team, the shape of the team, their process. For a long time, I used to walk around the edges of levels, seeing where I was kept and where I could break through! It's about learning what works well and what doesn't.





Joanna Dark's design was intended to evoke the strong, noir heroines of literature – fusing subtle characterisation with impressive Bond-like skills.



and having a reason to do them. That was certainly one of the springboards that got *Perfect Dark* started – less about *Do Androids Dream Of Electric Sheep?*, more about the general remit of Dick's short stories.

It's interesting to hear you compare your games to such highly acclaimed literature…

Well, I don't think it's a very interesting argument, when people argue over whether games are art – either you think they are, or you think they aren't, and there's little hope of persuading the people who are wrong [laughs]. I don't know, it's difficult, isn't it – classifying things in those terms, but come on: I've experienced certain feelings and whatever from my own games and others and that in itself says enough, certainly?

The world remains one of the most influential dystopian open-world environments in gaming – was it always the intention to create that kind of world?

Oh yes, it's a totally dystopic game. That was Carl Hilton's choice, mostly – he would not hesitate to put *Blade Runner* as his favourite film, even today, I'm guessing. He was the chief architect of the levels, and what you might call 'set design'. He had the most control over the feeling and shape of the levels, and that came after we sat down and said 'What 20 places do we most want to take people to?' We had the dam in *GoldenEye*, and that was amazing, so we wanted to think about that – these varied spaces and visually compatible spaces that would remind people of blockbuster films… Hilton did all the execution there.

We've heard there was supposed to be a complex light/dark mechanic, but development here was held back by technical capabilities at the time?

Oh yes – and that was reflected in the name of the game. It was supposed to be a game about light and dark, and the ignorance of not being able to see a large percentage of the world you're in. We did some tests with Steve Ellis, and it turns out the Nintendo 64 couldn't deliver even the smallest bit of what we wanted there, and it would be a lot of years before we'd see a mechanic like we were planning. The original ideas again go back to Ridley Scott – in his [cinematography], he certainly knows how to use light (or the absence of light) and the properties of materials like smoke, water and so on to make an image *sing* on-screen.

It was certainly my desire to have something of that kind in-game. Even now, the technology isn't really sufficient to hit upon what I wanted – you still can't make a ray-traced game… even after the technical side of things, you've got to think about mechanics. Even now, it's early days in terms of seeing light and dark used to form interesting game mechanics.

Despite the restrictions, though, *Perfect Dark* moves FPS games away from the *Doom*-alikes…

I guess it'd be too much to call *Perfect Dark* an open-world game, especially when we released around the time of the original *GTA*s (which, let's be honest, *own* the entire open world genre). *GoldenEye* and *Perfect Dark*, though, were much more open-ended and allowed you to roam so much more than the traditional shooters did at the time. It did away with 'the line' that ran through *Virtua Cop*, or 'the line' that ran through *Doom*, and that freedom

PEER IMPRESSION

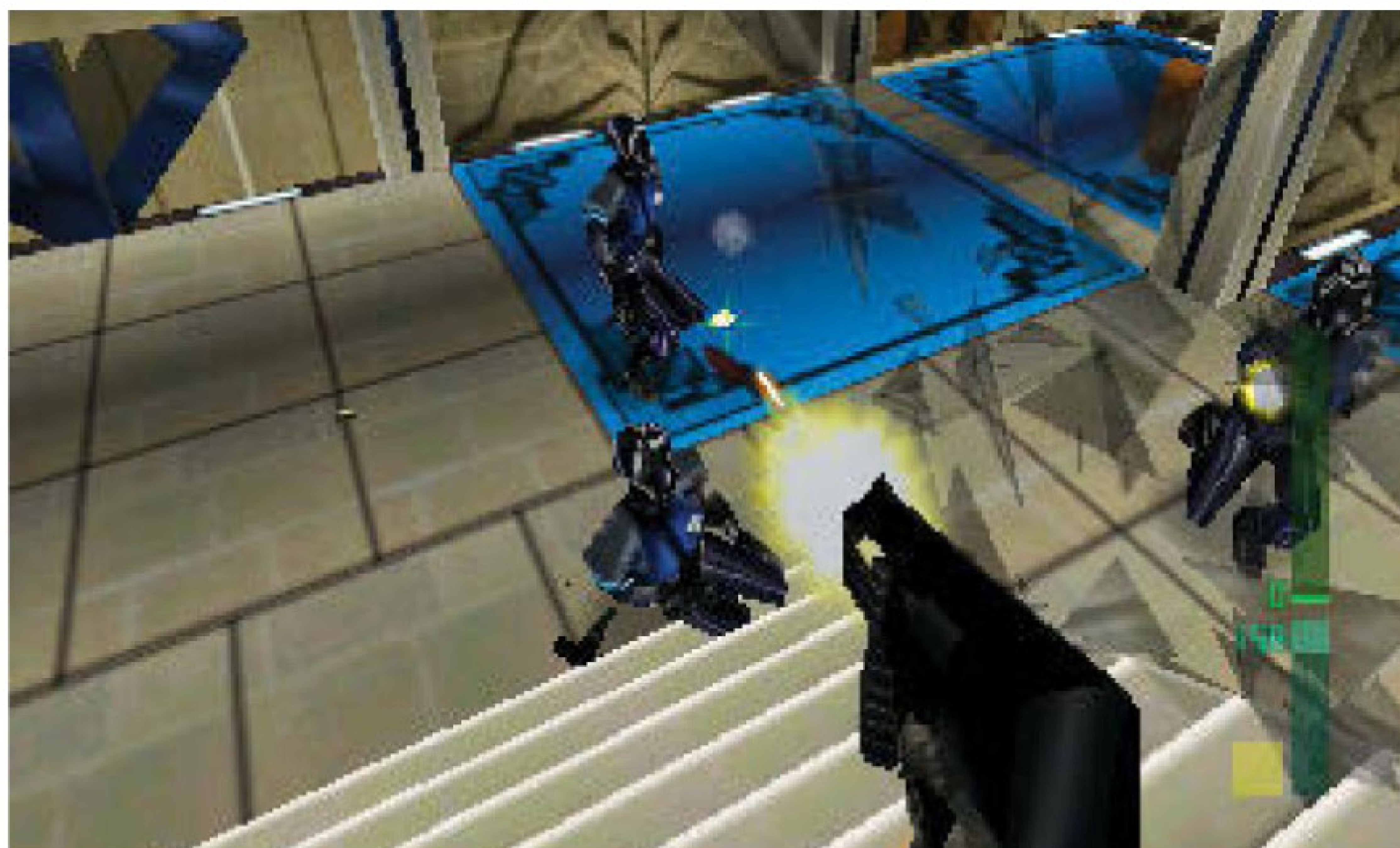
I LOVE *PERFECT DARK* on the Nintendo 64. It gave me days of true challenge – to score all of the 'cheat' times on each of the levels took a lot out of me, physically and emotionally, but it's an achievement I remain proud of. It's an experience I am incredibly grateful to Martin Hollis and his team for; the game gave me a deep sense of glee *and* drama that was magical. It was an incredible piece of work.

JONATHAN SMITH – HEAD OF PRODUCTION, TT GAMES





The level design – though more open than *GoldenEye*'s maps – was heavily influenced by its predecessor's take on complexes and labyrinthine tunnels.



certainly appealed to my tastes: that's what I prefer in *any* game. I don't like the experience of walking along a line, and I tend to notice the tricks that try to keep me there – you know, you walk into a dead end in these one-path games and you *know* it's a dead end. That's a shame.

Were there any other games that largely inspired *Perfect Dark* for you, on a personal level?

Oh yes, there was a game called *Exile* that was released on the BBC Micro, shortly after that console was no longer 'hot'. It was written by two people, took three or four years to develop. The physics were incredible: it had linear positional velocity, particle systems, and the whole game ran on an energy system revolving around gigajoules, so it was pretty hardcore. It was a 2D side-on open-*ish* world cave exploration game where you were exiled to a planet that was very hostile, and a force that was much more powerful than you lived deep down in some subterranean caves. The whole thing ran on 32K of memory – a huge world, an incredible achievement on an 8-bit machine… it was an incredible game design triumph, an incredible technical triumph, but so few people played it because it came out on the BBC Micro so late. Just from what I've said there, you can see how some of those ideas came through into [*Perfect Dark*].

Joanna Dark has become something of a cult figure in gaming – what was the inspiration behind her design?

Well, for Joanna Dark, I had in mind a character called Kimberly from the old Level 9 interactive fiction games on the BBC Micro… there was a game called *Snowfall* (1983), and it took a *long* time to get through, but about three quarters of the way through, there's a revelation that you're playing as a woman! I think you first learn you're called Kim, then later you learn that you're a woman named Kim Kimberly. I learned about *Metroid* and Samus Aran later, but certainly it was Kim Kimberly that inspired the most of Joanna Dark.

GOLDENEYE AND PERFECT DARK WERE MUCH MORE OPEN-ENDED AND ALLOWED YOU TO ROAM

But there were also the movie stars associated with spies and spying – the original *Dishonoured* film, from the 30s, had an extremely strong heroine who was put into horribly difficult positions, and that influenced me somewhat. Then there was *Nikita*, which we were all fans of [at the studio], and we took a lot of cues from that film – such an interesting personality; strong, interesting and also *crazy*. We wanted to draw in some of the personality from *all* these places, creating Joanna from the fragments of all these women. We did our best to make her a strong character – in the original *Perfect Dark*, she's not a super-model, she's more girl next door. Strong, stern, not a goth but certainly favours dark colours…

I think we did a fantastic job of creating a good character, though. Especially since first-person isn't a particularly good constraint to work in when you're character building. But in spite of that, I think the team did a fantastic job of bringing Joanna Dark to life.



It wasn't all about keeping the player in control – *GoldenEye* and *Perfect Dark* were still operating in the golden age of cutscenes and setpieces.

What was it about Nintendo that made it such an attractive publisher to work with?

Well, we've both got a very high level of mutual respect for each other – starting from that position, it makes a working relationship *that* much easier. And they've honoured me a great deal of flexibility in my work, and allowed me to grow as a producer of games… also who *can't* love Nintendo, you know?



It took a lot of work getting the games to look as good as they did on the Nintendo 64 – with one of the first fully 3D shooters, Hollis and his team set a benchmark in gaming.

GAME CHANGERS

STAR WARS: KNIGHTS OF THE OLD REPUBLIC

Released: 15 July, 2003 **Publisher:** LucasArts **Developer:** BioWare **System:** PC, Xbox



The original draft for the game stated that you could permanently lose squad members, but this was later removed for the sake of making the game more 'fun'

Everyone has fantasised about being a Jedi or Sith. In 2003, BioWare and LucasArts made that a reality – letting us live out our Star Wars dream

STAR WARS: KNIGHTS Of The Old Republic was ground-breaking for two major reasons – firstly, the game proved what a videogame could do with the *Star Wars* property: it wasn't just some cynical licensed cash-in (something that was expected back in the early Noughties). It was also, at the time of release, a cutting edge RPG – back in 2003, taking up 4GB on a hard-drive was unheard of. But it wasn't just a necessity for BioWare to use this much memory – it was also a statement of intent.

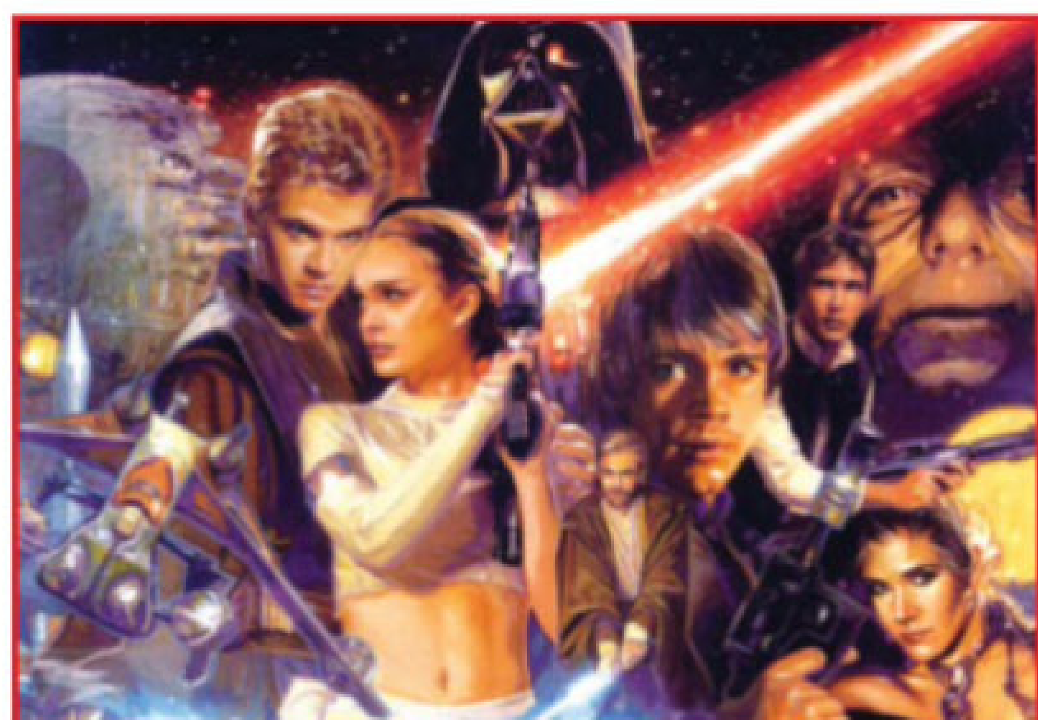
Knights Of The Old Republic was one of the deepest RPGs ever made at the time of release. It also added depth to other genres; there were sections of the game that relied on tactical third-person shooting and even first-person shooting areas, too. BioWare took the real-time combat popularised by MMORPGs and applied the mechanics to the single-player RPG, resulting in a unique half-turn based, half-real time hybrid that BioWare has since perfected across the *Mass Effect* and *Dragon Age* franchises.

The idea behind this wholly new approach to combat was to channel the inherent cinematography that came with the *Star Wars* franchise and gamify it; making encounters fast and action-oriented, every encounter similar to something you'd see Lucas himself orchestrate. It helped that BioWare and LucasArts had a very fluid and understanding relationship – considering how precious LucasArts could be about its property, BioWare has gone on record as saying 'very little' of its initial content was changed. High praise indeed for a licensed game.

The game was noted for its technical achievements – BioWare chose the Xbox as the game's leading platform because of its compatibility with the PC

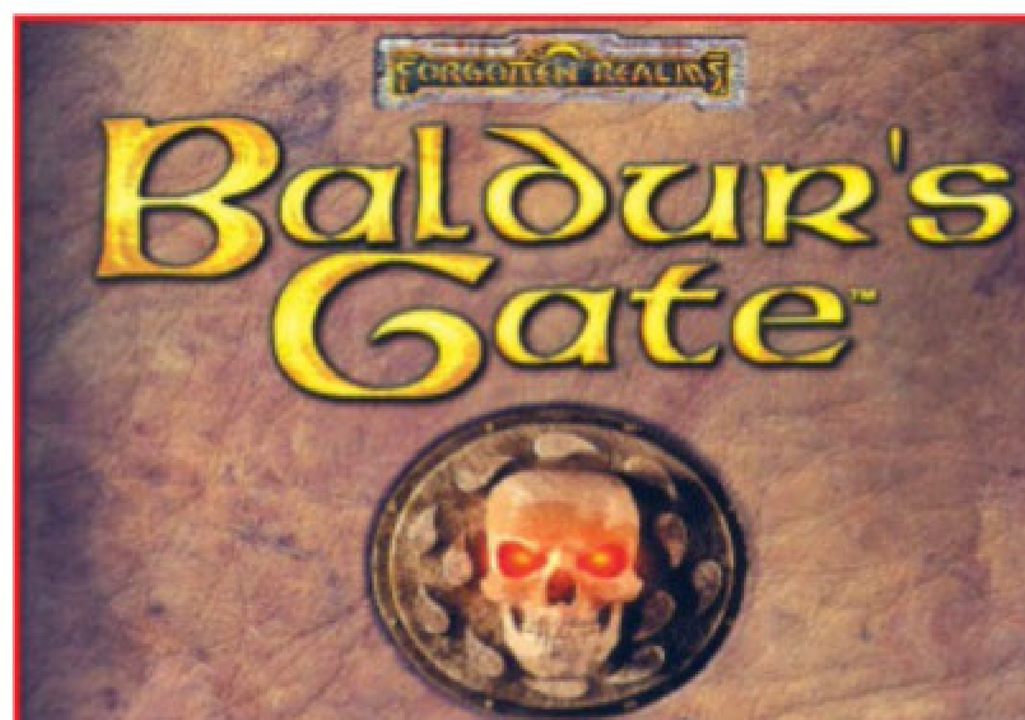
THE ANATOMY OF KNIGHTS OF THE OLD REPUBLIC

KNIGHTS OF THE OLD REPUBLIC HAS GONE ON TO INSPIRE A WEALTH OF OTHER RPGS, BUT WHAT INSPIRED THE GAME IN THE FIRST PLACE?



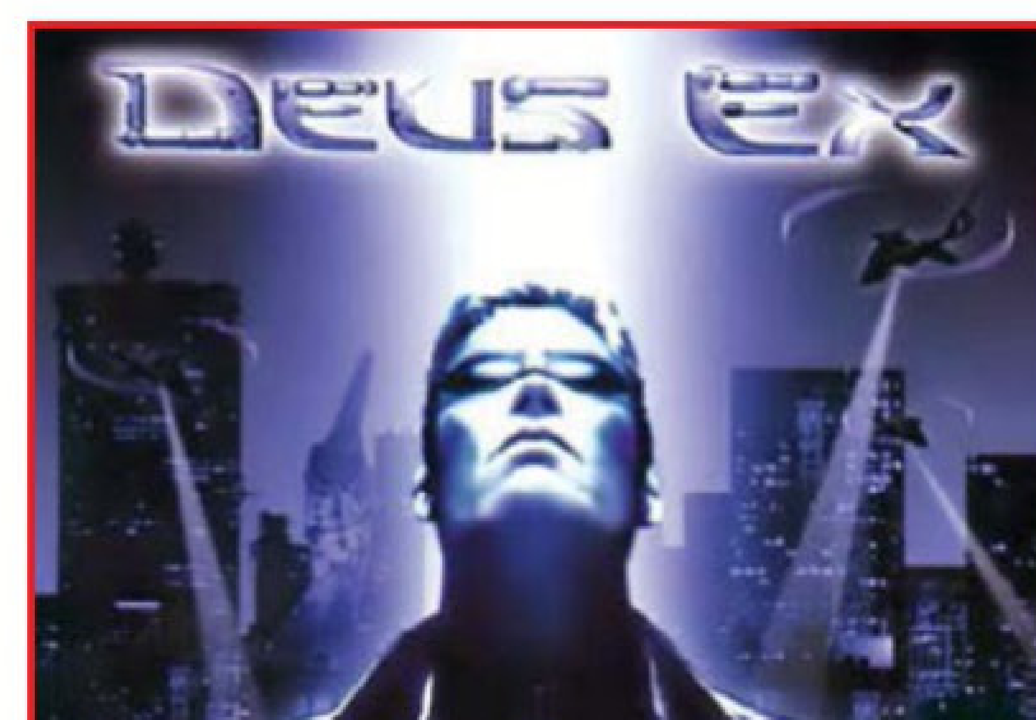
STAR WARS RPG

★ Wizards of the Coast's d20-based roleplaying game was a Dungeons & Dragons inspired tabletop game that required players to choose a certain class at the beginning of a story and then work together to progress in the game...seem slightly familiar?



BALDUR'S GATE

★ BioWare's previous games formed the foundations on which *Knights Of The Old Republic* would later be built – the iconic combat system actually started out as an exact carbon copy of Baldur's Gates strategically-centred mechanic before adjustments were made.



DEUS EX

★ The development team looked towards the revolutionary Deus Ex for inspiration to see how a game could make the player think about all the multiple paths its protagonist could take through a single level, and apply a roster's worth of skills to solve the puzzle.

(which BioWare was already well-versed in, thanks to *Neverwinter Nights*) and because the studio could achieve its vision of a huge, open world on the console. It was a vision that was well achieved; by the time the game shipped, it had grass that reacted to real-time wind, reactive dust on Tatooine and sand that remembers a player's footsteps – all of which were ground-breaking on console.

The game was also the first in the industry to weave a proper morality scale into the gameplay – the choices offered to us moved beyond the end-game 'kill or save *everyone*' options offered in action-RPGs before (with, perhaps, the exception of *Deus Ex*). *Knights Of The Old Republic* took that design philosophy to its logical conclusion; BioWare's seminal RPG had iterative decisions that affected the events in the story at pre-defined beats throughout the narrative, beats that were less binary than the law, chaos or neutral paths offered in Japanese alternatives on the market.

IT WAS AN RPG ANY-ONE COULD ENJOY – FROM WEATHERED ROLE PLAYERS TO FRESH-EYED STAR WARS FANS

KEY FACTS

- Jennifer Hale – who voiced the female protagonist – would go on to have a very lucrative relationship with BioWare, eventually voicing the female Shepard in the *Mass Effect* trilogy.
- Each selectable class in-game is based on a leading *Star Wars* character – Bounty Hunter (Boba Fett), Sorcerer (Darth Sidious), Jedi Knight (Luke Skywalker) and Smuggler (Han Solo) to name just a few.
- The PC version's additional location, NPCs and weapons were ultimately added to console via Xbox Live.

But what's the point in making us choose how we want the game to play out if we don't feel like we have a stake in the world? Enter BioWare's biggest strength: character development. It helped that *Knights Of The Old Republic* had the *Star Wars* universe to provide an elaborate backdrop, but BioWare was smart – it chose to delve into an undeveloped part of Lucas' lore, some 4000 years before the events of what would become *Episode I*.

This allowed the developers to establish its own world, replete with countless opportunities to tamper with *Star Wars* lore for its own ends. This lead to characters on both the Dark and Light sides that were fully fleshed out and *human*, something that RPGs had rarely managed to do before. It helped that each main character was fully voice acted, and acted *well*, too; each reaction and response to the player's actions catered and specifically directed to suit your alignment. This was a labour of love at LucasArts and BioWare – the voice recording took over a month of *solid* work, with actors recording throughout the day and night over five weeks to get enough lines to account for the game's non-linear structure.

The result of this ambitious and multi-faceted approach was a watershed moment for Western development – during the early 2000s, there was a rebellion against the stagnating RPG scene that was starting to congeal in Japan. BioWare came along and proved the RPG didn't have to be hidden behind walls of text and inaccessible menus, spikey-haired protagonists and battles with God: this was an RPG anyone could enjoy – from weathered dice-wielding role players to fresh-eyed *Star Wars* fans. BioWare changed the world – it doesn't take a Jedi to see that.



GAME CHANGERS

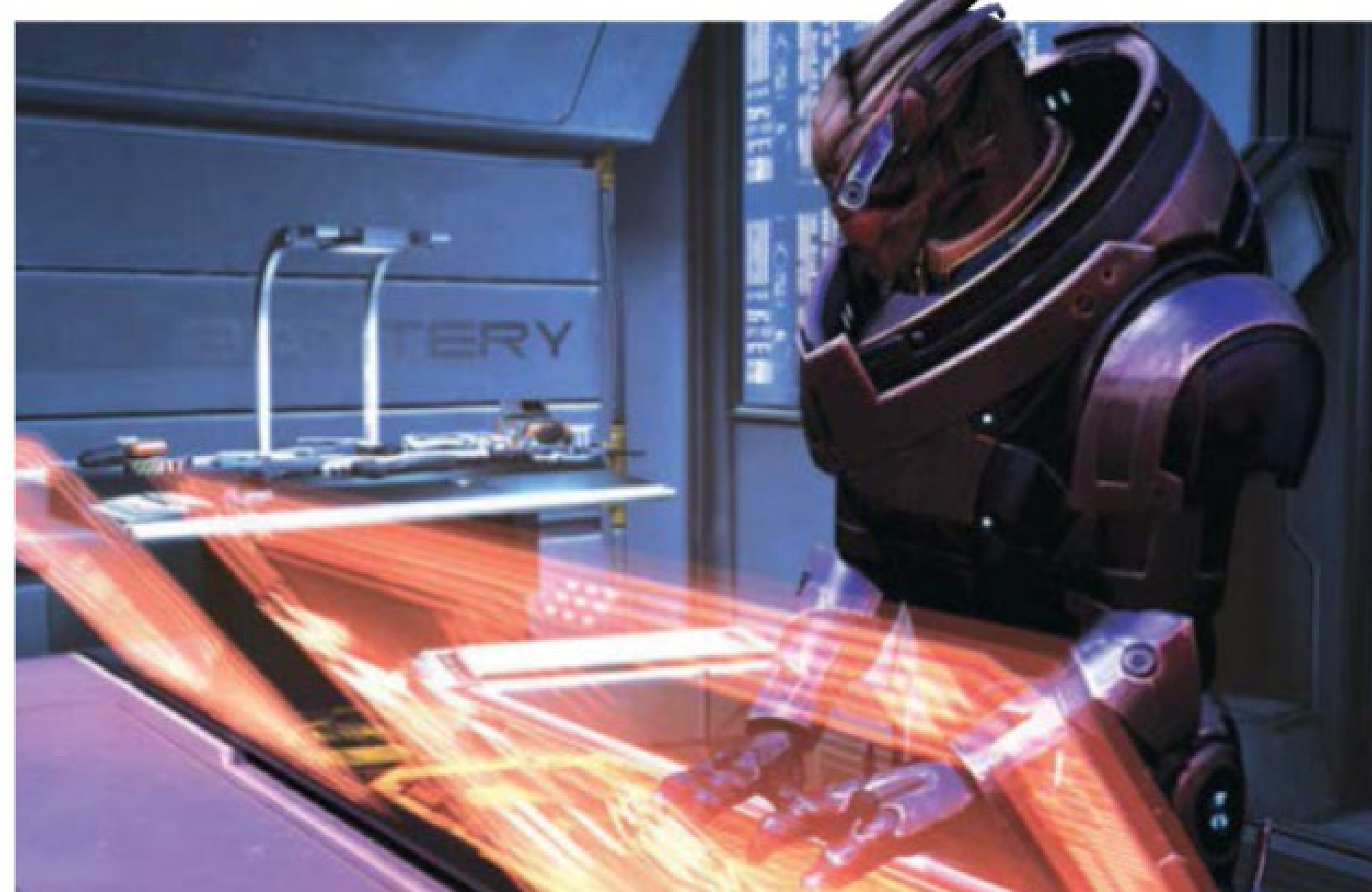
8 OF BIOWARE'S MOST MEMORABLE COMPANIONS

BIOWARE MAY HAVE CARVED OUT A NICHE WITH ITS WELL-REALISED CHARACTERS IN KNIGHTS OF THE OLD REPUBLIC, BUT THEY WEREN'T THE FIRST (OR LAST) GREAT PERSONAS THEY WOULD CRAFT



HK-47

■ HK-47 IS A Hunter-Killer assassin droid made by the Dark Sith Lord, Darth Revan in *KOTOR*. His memory wiped, he's a nomadic sociopath – a misanthropic machine motivated by a desire for chaos, and an irrational hatred of organic life. His idea of love, for example, is "making a shot to the knees of a target 120 kilometres away using an Aratech sniper rifle with a tri-light scope."



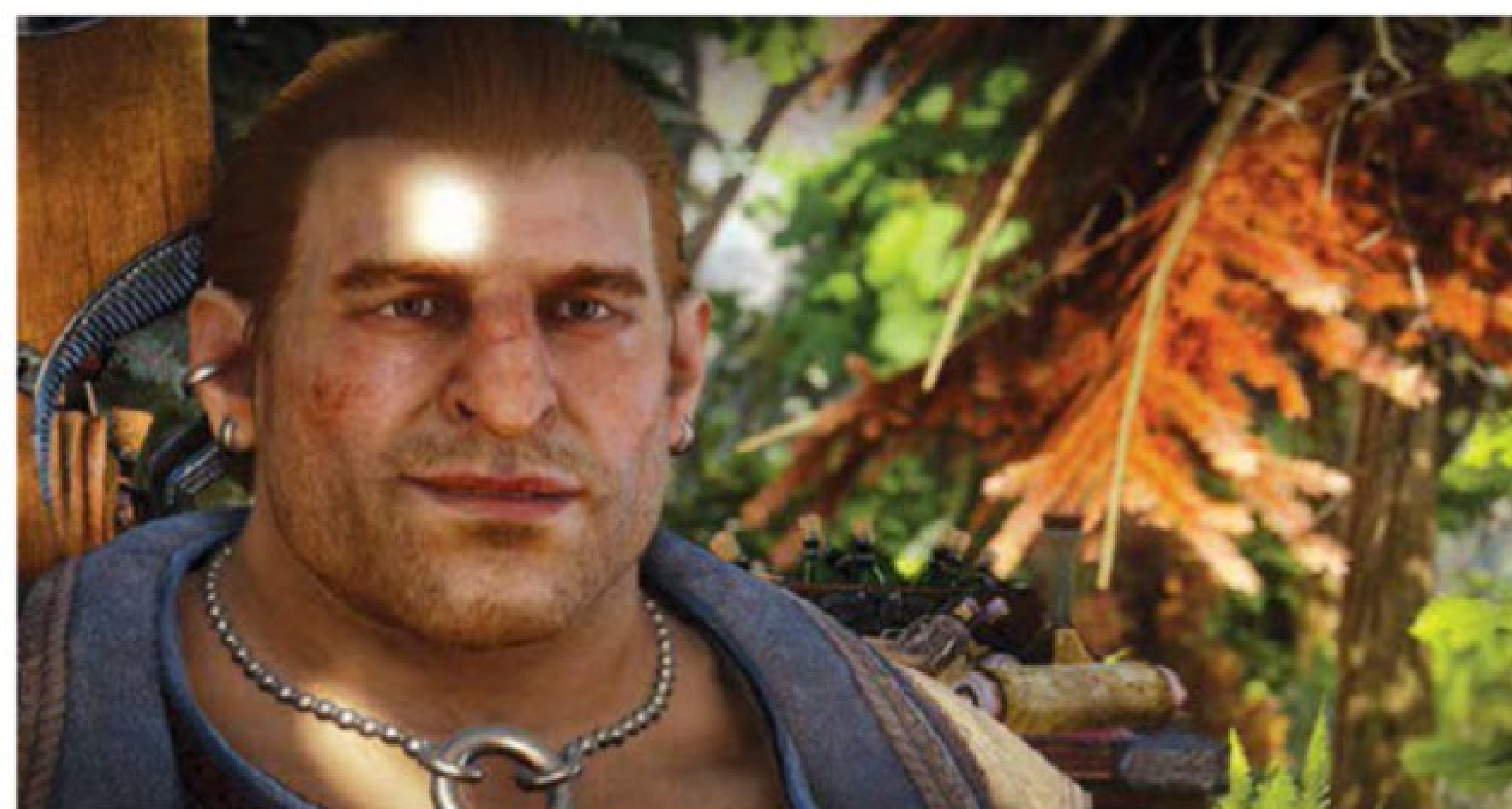
GARRUS VAKARIAN

■ GARRUS HAS THE outward appearance of a cold, hard killer. Like most Turians, he was trained in all aspects of military combat by the age of 15. But a love for the order of things lead him to the police force, where he meets your character in the first *Mass Effect*. Here, you slowly unravel the enigma that is Garrus – the confident, loyal and mostly untainted *good* force in the *Mass Effect* galaxy.



MINSC

■ THE HULKING TATTOOED ranger is passable on his own, but it's his odd pet – Boo – that makes Minsc endearing. The 'miniature giant space hamster' lets Minsc express himself in an unself-conscious way by chatting nonsense to his pet. In *Baldur's Gate II*, BioWare gave him motivation, making him even more empathetic.



VARRIC

■ ONE OF GAMING'S most endearing rascals, Varric is an important *Dragon Age* character due to his unique placement as a narrator. Yes, he likes to elaborate, and yes, he likes to lace his stories with a little self-aggrandising pomp, but he's a good friend to your protagonist and, beneath it all, has a heart of gold.



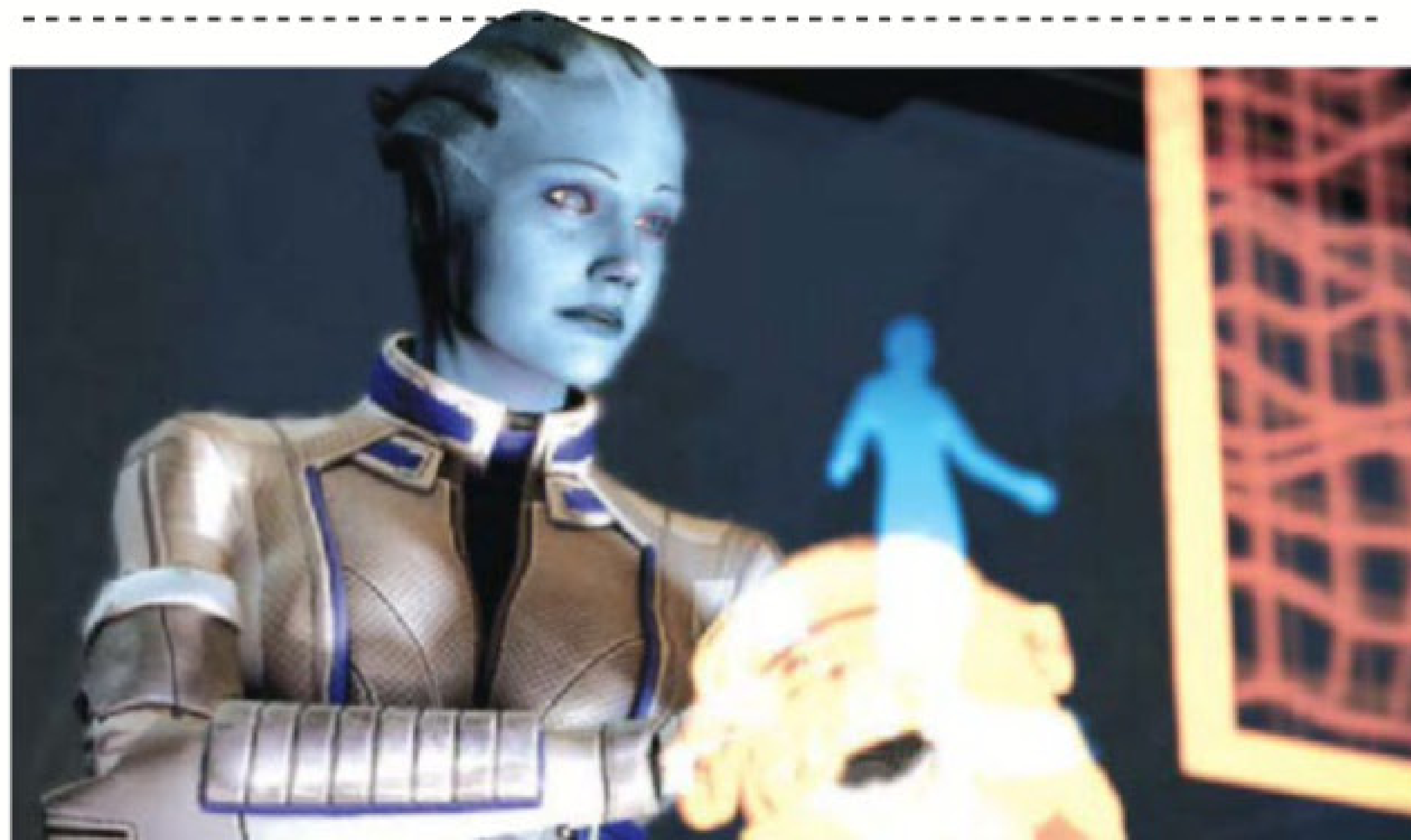
MISSION VAO

■ THE STREET URCHIN turned Ebon Hawk crew mate, Mission was a uniquely damaged Twi'lek in *KOTOR* – she's got a sunny disposition despite a history of abandonment. Her relationship with Wookie Zaalbar, is reminiscent of Han's relationship with Chewbacca – and that's sure of getting into our hearts.



THANE KRIOS

■ THANE IS AN assassin, but makes each assassination intimate, memorable. He's got a photographic memory that lets him relive each of his kills in detail – not helping his intense guilt complex. Oh, and he's terminally ill, giving his whole arc a definitive ending that's emotionally crippling by the end of *Mass Effect 3*.



DR. LIARA T'SONI

■ BIOWARE ONCE AGAIN shows its ability to infuse characters with unique personalities with Liara – it would've been so easy to reduce her to being *Mass Effect*'s science-toting hippy pacifist, but that's just boring. Rather, Liara has serious mummy issues, with a wistful naivety and confused feelings towards humanity. She made you want to be a better Spectre in the game, and a better human.



ALISTAIR

■ IN A WORLD as brutal as *Dragon Age*'s, it's important to have someone to provide a little comic relief. Luckily, Alistair has this incredible gift for relieving the tension when you most need it. It's like he can surgically deliver the most reassuring line on a whim, always with a self-aware smile. He's like *Dragon Age*'s big brother figure; it's a shame he isn't quite fit to be ruler of the kingdom, isn't it?



BEST INTRO

POKÉMON FIRE RED/LEAF GREEN

GAME FREAK / THE POKÉMON COMPANY, [NINTENDO] GAMEBOY ADVANCE **2004**

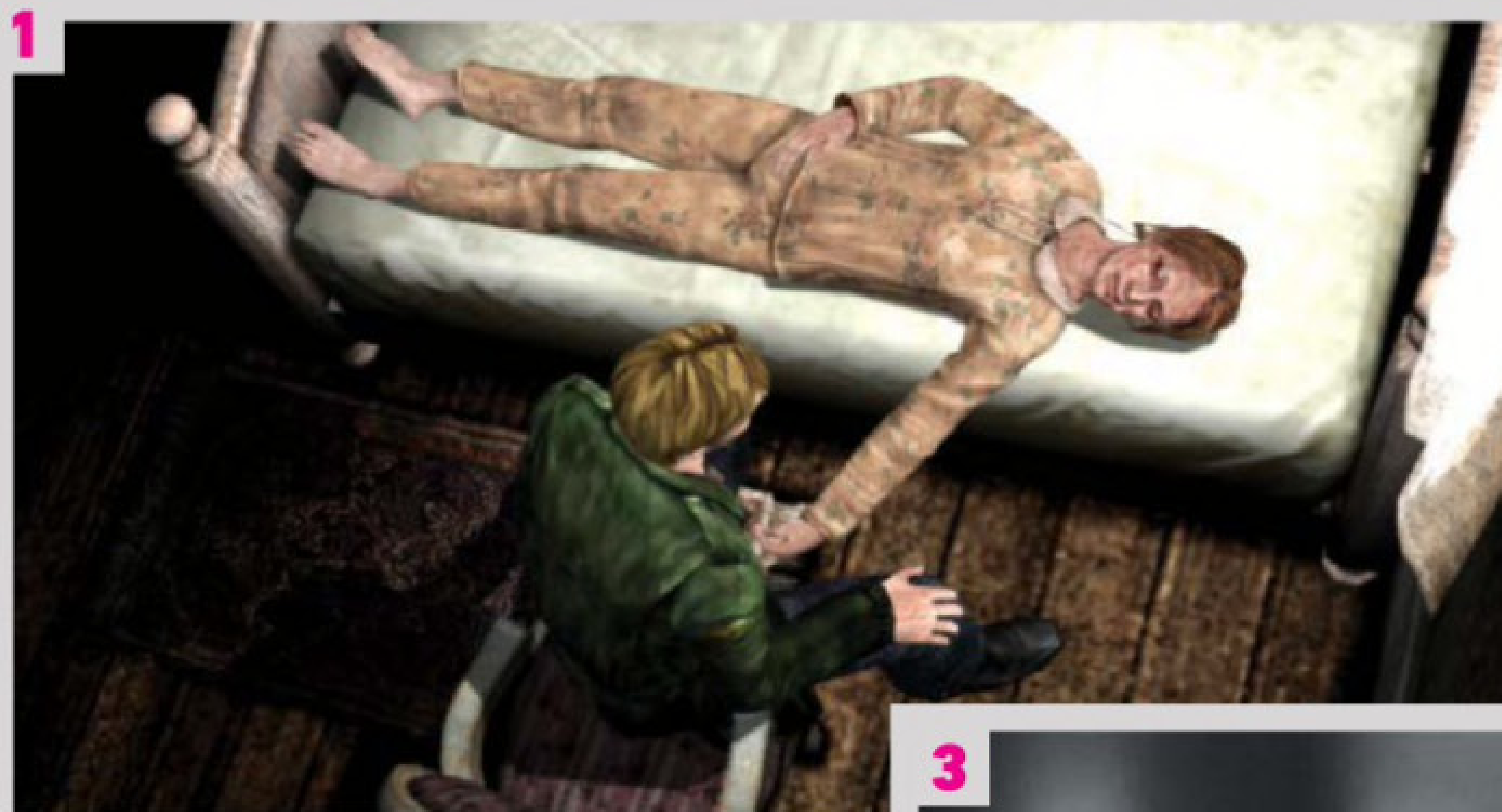
WE'VE USED THE *Fire Red/Leaf Green* versions of *Pokémon* here for illustrative purposes, but the 'best intro' label can be applied to all the *Pokémon* games, really – yes, they're somewhat formulaic, but therein lies the charm: each new adventure takes your protagonist, a professor and a mascot Pokémon for that generation and gives you a quick rundown of Pokémon lore, always accompanied by the soaring and inspirational theme, comprised of a constantly evolving four-note motif. Your high-resolution Trainer is subsequently shrunk down and plopped into the world – a perfect bit of symbolism for how we, as players, are taken by the hand into the new adventure that awaits, before we're offered the choice of a 'fire, water or grass' starter. As intros go, it doesn't get much more engaging.

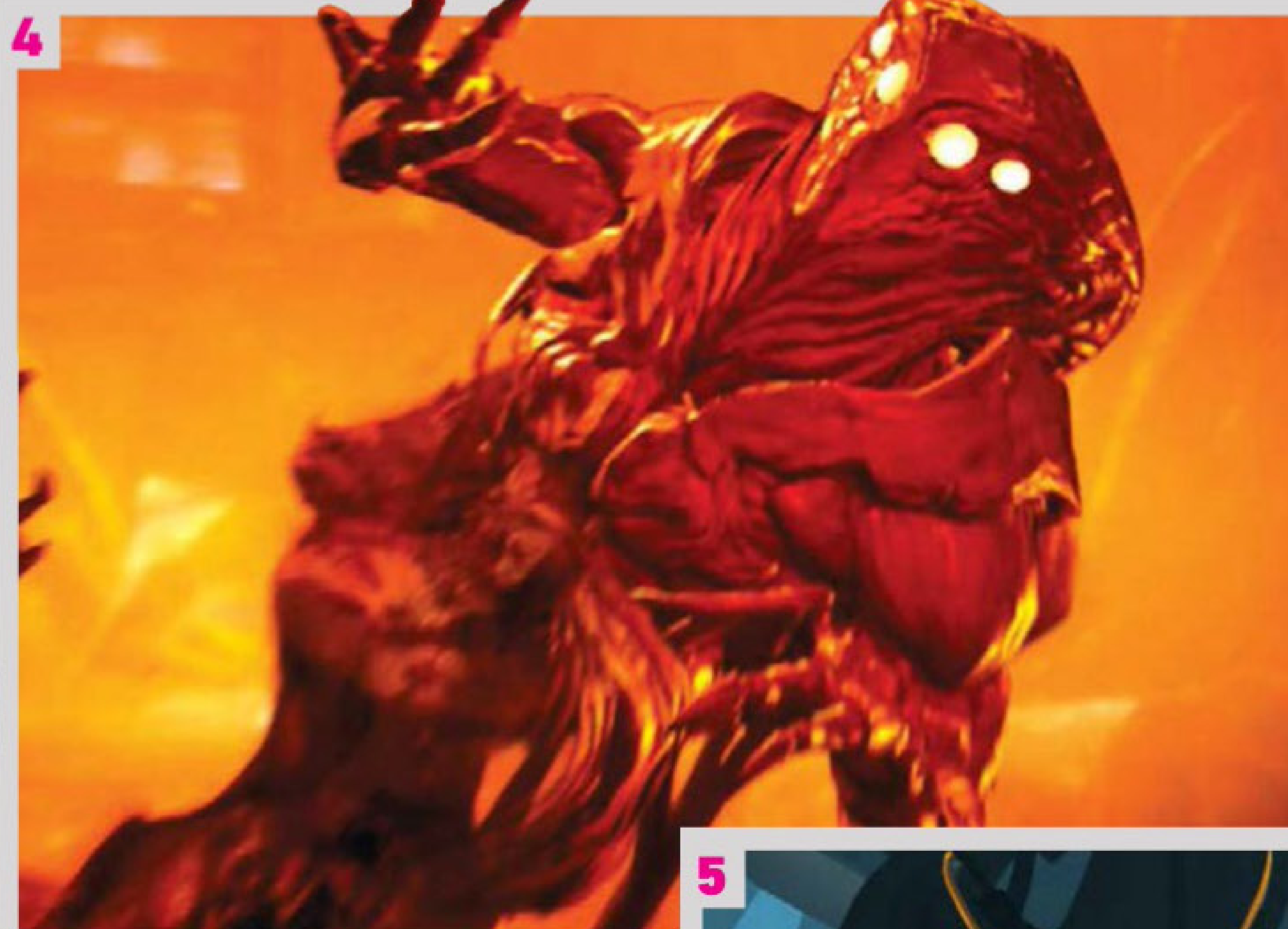


ESSENTIALS

10 ALTERNATIVE INTERPRETATIONS

■ We're big fans of fan theories here at **games™** – we spend hours reading into ridiculous, semi-possible explanations of half-concluded story threads. We probably spent more time researching philosophical implications of *BioShock Infinite* than we did playing it. Recently, we've been privy to some interesting theories, and sharing is caring. Bear with us, things are about to get complicated. Also, *massive* spoilers ahead.


1


4


2


3


5

James Is A Paranoid Schizophrenic
Game: *Silent Hill 2*

1 *Silent Hill* hit its peak with the second game, largely due to how the developer realised the foggy mystery of the eponymous town properly, but also because of the game's confused protagonist, James. James was only trying to figure out what happened to his wife, Mary, but a theory (later kind of confirmed by designer Masahiro Ito) suggests James had killed his beloved Mary himself, bringing the events of *Silent Hill 2* to life. Worse yet, he kept her body in the trunk of the car the whole time – giving the 'now [we] can be together' line in the suicidal 'In Water' ending a whole new, darker meaning.

Aeris wasn't supposed to die
Game: *Final Fantasy VII*

2 There's a multitude of evidence that suggests *Final Fantasy VII*'s most emotional scene was never meant to go down in the tragic way it did. Aside from data buried deep in the game's code that contains text data for Aeris' presence later in the game, there's also a place for Ancient in the very last boss battle, a conversation with Tifa about how she's 'convinced Aeris will return' and supporting artwork of Aeris with the Highwind airship… it seems the decision to kill her off happened late in development, and for the better – we struggle to think of a more powerful scene in the PSOne era.

You're The Villain
Game: *Limbo*

3 It's no secret that *Limbo* is purgatorial – the main theory around the game's depressing and oppressive setting suggests our young hero is trapped in a state of perpetual, well, limbo: the game is cursed to repeat forever, no happy endings for you. However, a deeper reading of the game reveals that the boy killed his sister, hence why the other children you meet in the journey flee from you, and explains the two recently-buried graves at the main menu. Think about how you meticulously pull the spider 'boss' apart, then happily roll it around, too. They aren't quite the actions of a sane kid, right? Right?

Shepard Was Always Indoctrinated
Game: *Mass Effect* series

4 There's an in-depth theory about *Mass Effect 3*'s original ending labelled as the 'Indoctrination ending', which explains many plot holes in the third game away. There's a deeper theory that suggests our hero was indoctrinated from the start – the *very first* mission in the first game sees Shepard encounter an ancient 'beacon', where he hears the same 'scraping' sounds other NPCs associate with Reaper indoctrination. Looking at some conversation options reveals Shepard's irrational support for the Protheans, with no prior reason for it – the Protheans, by the way, end up as Reapers…

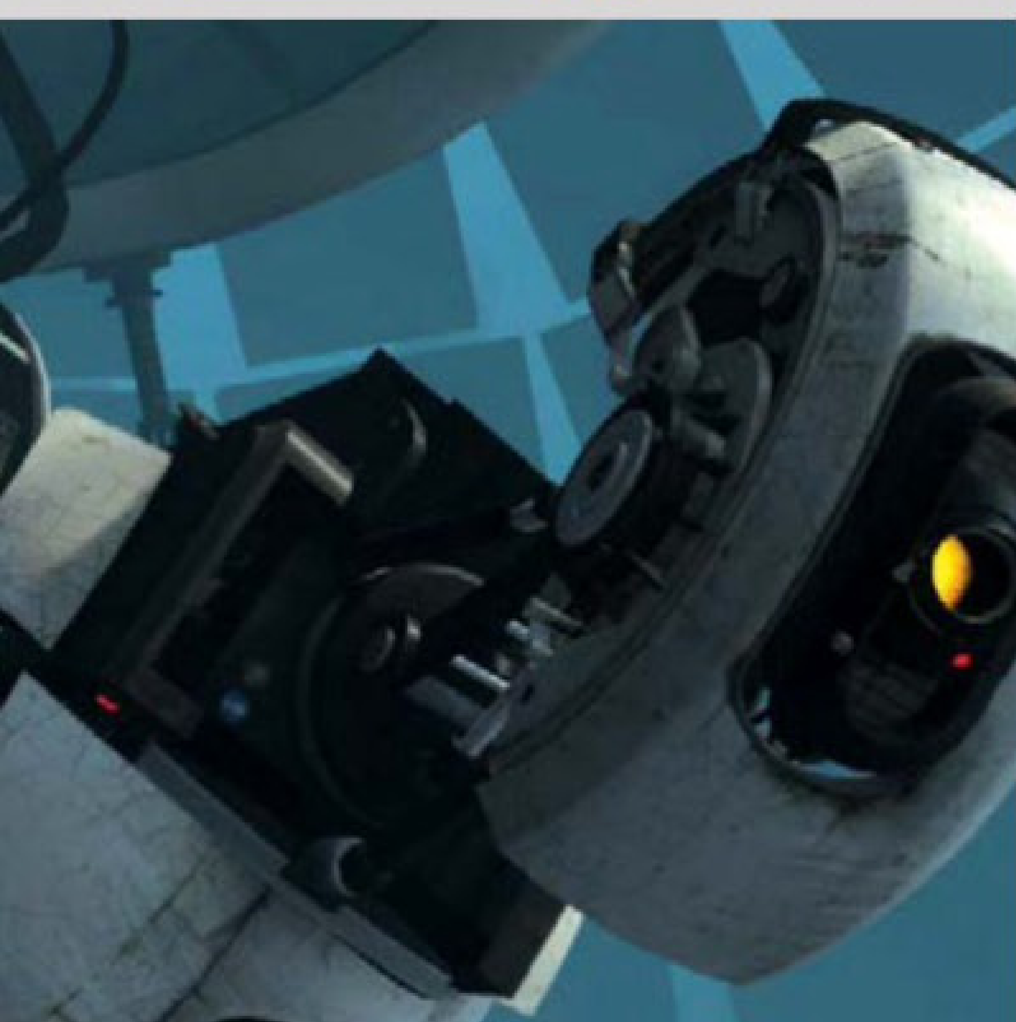
GlaDOS Wants To Die
Game: *Portal* series

5 There's a dark heart beating beneath Valve's game-changing puzzler – the light-hearted air is actually undercut by an imprisoned, super-smart AI – the game's main antagonist that puts you, Chell, through your paces. But GlaDOS – a machine made with the mind of a top scientist – is aware of her own incarceration, and seems to be prepping you for murder (isn't that right, Companion Cube?) Why? Because she's goading you on – she wants you to come into her lair and dissemble her, because for anything *that* smart, being doomed to a lifetime of test reruns would be maddening.















The Pokémon World Was Decimated By War

Game: *Pokémon Red/Blue*

6 Think about it: you're a kid without a father, whose main rival is an orphan, and you go out into the world without a large male presence. There are only really a few male trainers you'll encounter (men being typically recruited as cadets in Japan), as well as a few gym leaders and a military presence. When you hit the gym in Vermilion City, leader Lt. Surge claims 'electric Pokémon saved his life in the war!' What war? Could it be a war – potentially with Kalos or Unova – that required the conscription of a majority of men, leaving kids with nothing better to do than to start a quest?

Link Is Dead

Game: *The Legend Of Zelda: Majora's Mask*

7 Remember the popular 'five stages of grief' method of dealing with loss? Well, a popular theory outlines that that's exactly what Link is living through once he ventures into Termina. Think about the NPC's dialogue: Clock Town itself represents denial, Woodfall is anger, Snowhead is bargaining, Great Bay is depression and Ikana Valley is acceptance – all compounded by Link's constant refusal to accept his own fate by rewinding time when it's all about to end. Skull Kid knows this, and plays with Link – who likely either died on the way into Termina (remember that fall?) or in his previous quest.

Giygax Is A Foetus

Game: *Earthbound*

8 When he was younger, *Earthbound*'s designer Shigesato Itoi accidentally walked into the wrong screening at a cinema, and witnessed a particularly gruesome murder scene in *Kenpei To Barabara Shibijin*. The scene clearly affected him, since he claimed the final boss in *Earthbound* was directly inspired by the film – think about it; you travel through an oddly biological zone to meet a creature that looks a *lot* like a foetus. The theory suggests that you're actually aborting Giygas in the womb, making sure the ultimate evil is never born. You're told to 'get [Giygas] when he's at his weakest', after all…

Booker DeWitt Is Andrew Ryan

Game: *BioShock Infinite*

9 'There's always a lighthouse. There's always a man. There's always a city.' Think about *BioShock* and *Infinite*'s intro – both games have a man, a lighthouse and a city. Yes, the settings are different, but it makes sense the infinite worlds of, um, Infinite operate on a scale of extremes: from above the sky to below water. Also, the Bathyspheres Booker travels in *only* work with Ryan's DNA… yet you just waltz in there. EVE and Salts are similar, Plasmids are Vigours, Fontaine is Daisy and the Lutece twins are Tenenbaum. Hear that sound? That's your mind being blown.

You Are The Darkness

Game: *Destiny*

10 'The Darkness!' screams a Fallen Captain as you enter his habitat under Earth's cosmodrome. 'Why would he say that?' we think, before shooting him anyway… but it got us thinking. Maybe the Traveller convinced us it was giving us light, but really it was looking for another army after carving a trail of destruction through. You were dead, revived by this *thing*, this Ghost – and now you're indebted to it. Think of the language, too – you're either a Warlock, a Hunter or a Titan, traditionally all negative terms. Against the Wizards, Knights and Templars you come up against, that seems positively villainous, right?

THE VAULT



PLAYSTATION 4 CHARGING MAT

MANUFACTURER: **NUMSKULL** PRICE: **£29.99**

THIS IS THE future we were promised. Being able to charge your gamepads without wires is the dream that we've been looking forward to for some time and Numskull has delivered it for PS4. This officially licensed product is a great combination of form and function. All you need to do is plug the mat into the mains, attach an adapter to the DualShock 4 and then place the controller on the mat to begin charging. It really couldn't be any simpler and less intrusive for giving your pads a charge between gaming sessions.

The mat itself is also rather nicely designed. It's slim, slick and simple design means it's not too intrusive and won't jump out at you as being completely out of place. The finish is very nice and the light outlines of DualShock's is a pleasing touch.

Happily, there's enough room on it for two controllers and it charges both of them pretty quickly. What's more, it can also store games and Blu-rays, so it's a pretty good thing to have around if you're taking your games and pad over to a friend's place.

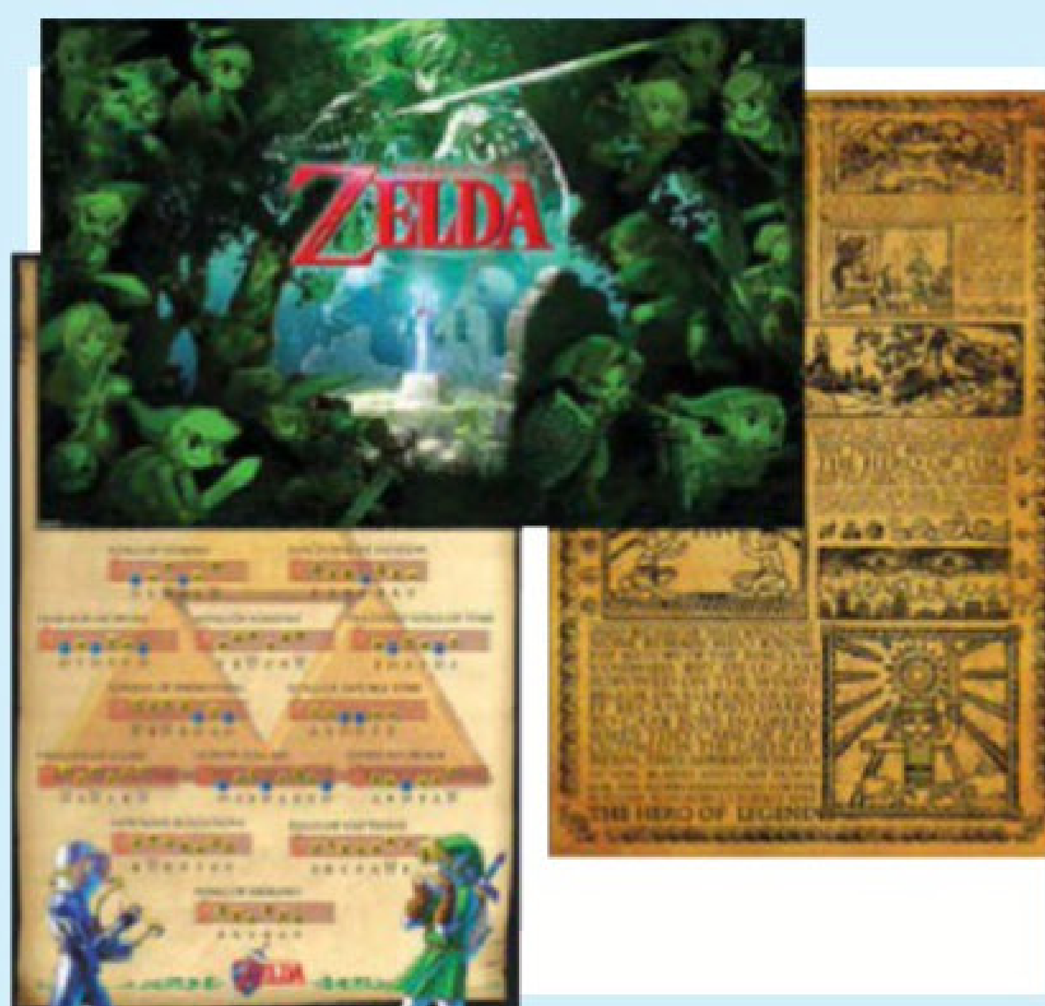
Numskull's Charging Mat is both smart and practical. It's fair to say that this is potentially the beginning of a very interesting new line of gaming accessories for the coming years. Expect to see plenty of imitators, but we doubt there will be many much better than this one, so it's well worth the investment.



PAC-MAN GHOST LIGHT

With variable speeds for how it phases through its 16 colours, this mood-setting lamp may not be based on the most relaxing character in the history of gaming, but it should have that kind of effect on you in your home.

Firebox.com



LEGEND OF ZELDA POSTERS

There are three poster styles to choose from at Think Geek at the moment with a cool Link montage, Ocarina song sheet and Hylian legend designs to choose from. You may be best off just grabbing them all.

ThinkGeek.com

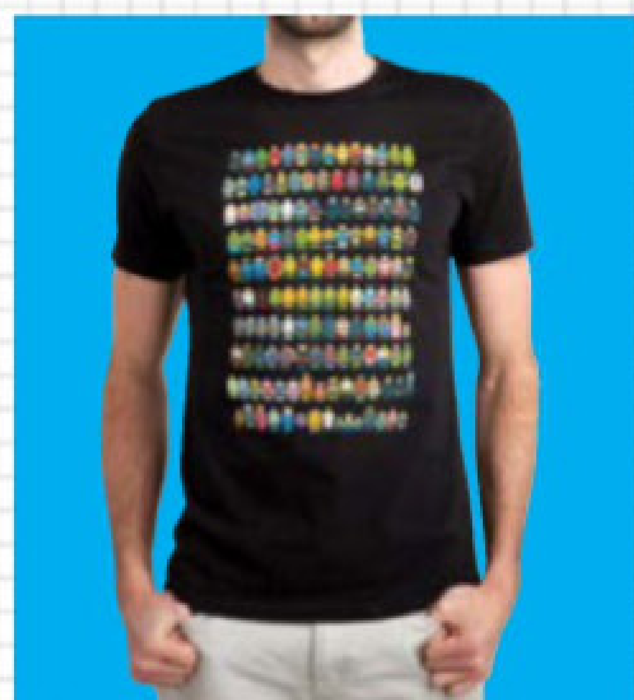


RETRO GAMING ENGRAVED ALUMINIUM COASTERS

These rather nicely engraved coasters come from VectorEngrave, a specialist on Etsy. Shipped from Manchester, they include a *Donkey Kong*, *Tetris*, *Pac-Man* and *Space Invaders* design in the pack.

Etsy.com

GAMING CLOTHING



MINI PIXELS

As the gamification of popular characters goes, this has to be one of the simplest and most numerous. It's got recognisable versions of the cast of *The Avengers*, *Spider-Man* and more.
Threadless.com



SPILLED MEMORABILIA

There are few things as annoying as finding an ink stain on your shirt, but getting it from a pen rather than a Blooper from *Mario* seems preferable.
Threadless.com



I CAN'T BLOW OUT THE CANDLES

It's the everyday-life challenges that afflict videogame characters that we fail to appreciate. Dhalsim's struggle with blowing out candles on a cake in this instance we found to be adorable.
Threadless.com



MINECRAFT LEGO THE END

SOLD BY: **FORBIDDEN PLANET** PRICE: **£29.99**

THE COMBINATION OF Lego and *Minecraft* makes so much sense it actually re-invigorates our belief that we live in a sane and logical universe. There are plenty of pretty detailed and fun kits out there, but this one of The End is a favourite of ours since it features the wonderful Ender Dragon and a bunch of Ender Men. It's a pretty neat little re-creation of the nominal *Minecraft* end game that's about as tough to reach as it is to defeat.
forbiddenplanet.com

TITANFALL K'NEX: IMC ATLAS TITAN SET

SOLD BY: **FORBIDDEN PLANET** PRICE: **£19.99**

WE SAW SOME rather excellent Lego re-creations of the Titans from *Titanfall* in the run up to release, but this officially licensed kit comes from K'Nex and has a lot of custom pieces to give it an amazingly close resemblance to the in-game Atlas mech. What you end up with is a pretty meaty machine to play with and a rather cute pilot to pop into its shell. K'Nex actually has a whole bunch of these including other mechs and stages.
forbiddenplanet.com



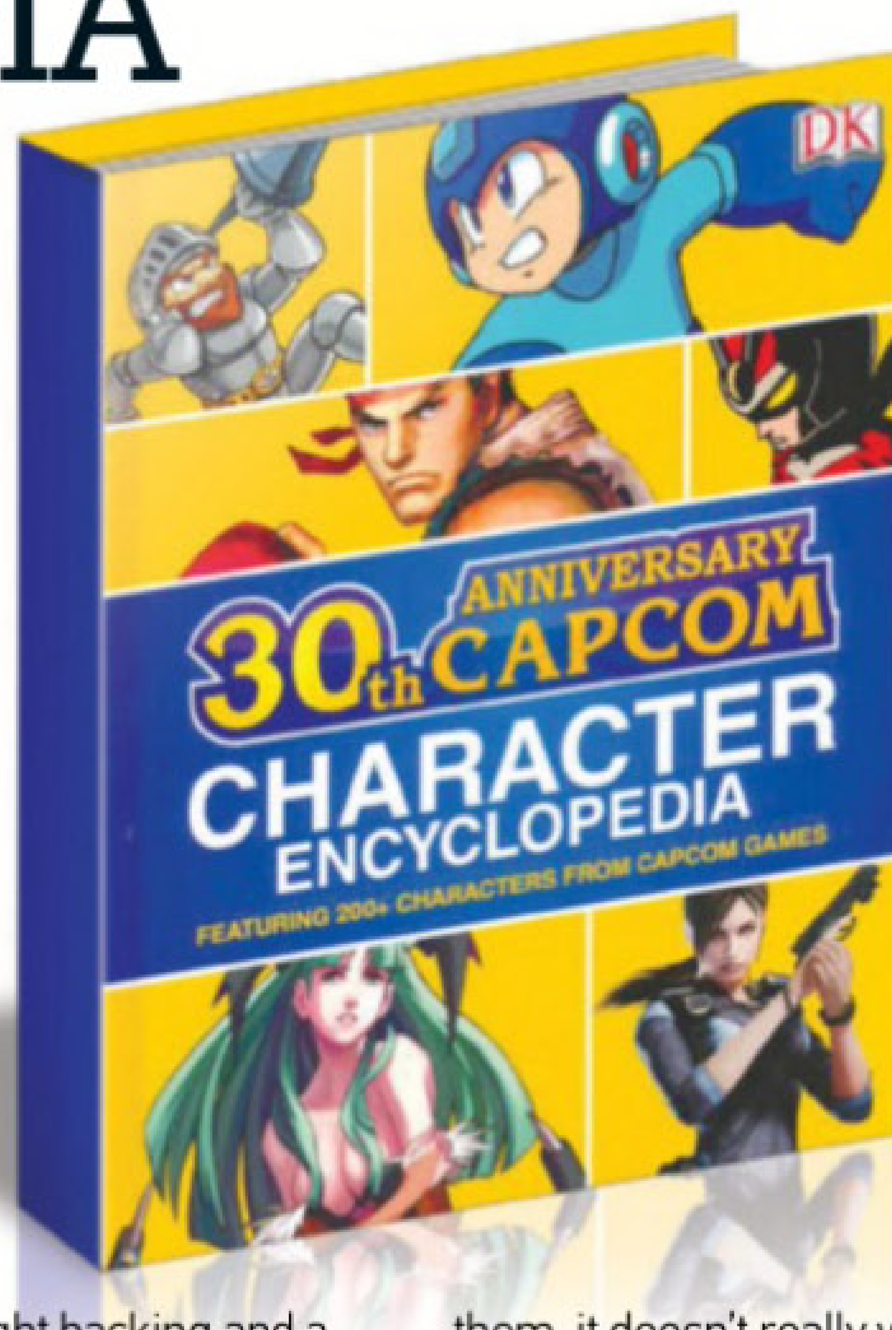
HALO MEGA BLOKS COVENANT SCARAB



SOLD BY: **AMAZON** PRICE: **£229.99**

THE SCARAB BATTLE in *Halo 3* remains one of our favourite fights from the series, and this Mega Bloks kit is a pretty epic re-creation of the key players in that skirmish. It's also a pretty heftily priced piece of kit, but with a final build size of 26 inches long and 14.5 inches high, this is a monster of a build to get your hands around. It has plenty of articulation and a fully designed interior for all the Covenant forces you could want to pack in there.
amazon.co.uk

CAPCOM 30TH ANNIVERSARY CHARACTER ENCYCLOPEDIA



PUBLISHER: **DK**

COMPREHENSIVE, BUT NOT exactly dazzling, this book was released back in 2013 to mark Capcom's 30th Birthday and to celebrate the rich array of characters it's managed to build over those years. From Ryu to Viewtiful Joe, it has been an incredible run and it's rather a shame that these days the Japanese game developer seems to have downsized a little and slowed its production machine.

The days of massive releases sometimes appear to be in the past, and yet we've already had a taste of *Dead Rising*, *Street Fighter* and *Resident Evil* this generation. Whether we'll get the new IP that we enjoyed last generation, we don't know, but looking through this book is a great reminder of how inventive Capcom can be. Given the right backing and a system it's familiar with, the staff at Capcom are capable of making some stunning titles.

This collection is a nice walk down memory lane, but with a page devoted to each character and rather familiar artwork to illustrate them, it doesn't really wow us. If it just contained a little extra that fans couldn't get elsewhere it would have been very special. As it stands, it's a nice enough reference.

forbiddenplanet.com

VERDICT 7/10

DRAGON AGE – THE MASKED EMPIRE

If you enjoyed your time playing *Dragon Age: Inquisition* then you may want to delve a little deeper into the past of Empress Celene and her treacherous family. *The Masked Empire* is packed with insight into some key relationships that will add much to your understanding.

titanbooks.com

ASSASSIN'S CREED – HAWK

The *Creed* saga heads to Egypt in the fourth chapter of this graphic novel series, but it's not ancient Egypt we're seeing. Set in 1257 we get to see the Assassin and Templar order at the peak of their battle in the Middle East. As ever, powerful artefacts are afoot.

titanbooks.com

STAR WARS: THE OLD REPUBLIC – ANNIHILATION

While we're fuzzy on what we can consider canon in the *Star Wars* universe, we're happy to accept it all as (at worst) professionally written fan fiction and *The Old Republic* has established a rich narrative with a raft of books like this.

titanbooks.com

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Cover Image
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13 issue subscription Europe – £70.00
13 issue subscription ROW – £80.00

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Printed by Southernprint Ltd, 17-21 Factory Road, Upton Ind. Estate, Poole, Dorset, BH16 5SN
01202 628 300
Distributed in the UK, Eire & the Rest of the World by Marketforce, Blue Fin Building, 110 Southwark Street, London, SE1 0SU 0203 148 3300
www.marketforce.co.uk
Distributed in Australia by Network Services (a division of Bauer Media Group), Level 21 Civic Tower, 66-68 Goulburn Street, Sydney, New South Wales 2000, Australia
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ISSN 1478-5889





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